VIDEOGAME CULTURE

DECEMBER 2005

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Do you feel normal? As someone who doesn't just play games, but likes to read about them and talk about them, do you feel marginalised? No, almost certainly not. Gaming has been chasing the mainstream for years, and in that time it has established itself on our high streets and in our living rooms, accepted if not understood or welcomed. Videogames have become normal.

And yet it's not until you find yourself in a circumstance where gaming really *is* mainstream that you become aware of just how disconnected it still remains from the world at large. Nothing braces you for how it feels to stand in the middle of the Tokyo Game Show, watching a young mother help her four-year-old balance on tiptoes, patiently explaining the controls to him as he stretches up to grab his first go on a PSP demo pod. This is what normal looks like: parents, grandparents, friends and partners fitting some game time in around their other weekend plans. (To sample some of the inimitable Tokyo Game Show atmosphere for yourself, have a look at this month's free DVD.)

It's a feeling that hit again when we sat down with four of the UK's most influential comedy writers – longtime gamers to a man – to hear their thoughts on how well videogames are exploiting their potential to entertain the same market their own work targets (see p72). As they speak, drawing freely on game experiences and references, it makes you painfully aware of how often you edit similar content out of your own conversation when talking to 'normal' people. This is what life would be like if videogaming had really moved into the mainstream.

It's an issue of which Nintendo is all too aware, and its unveiling of its Revolution controller (see p82) shows just how radical it's willing to be in order to address it. If it lives up to its obvious potential, then that moment, when gaming finally does connect with the masses, will be nearer than it's ever been before.



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"It's Saturday!"
"No, it's not. It's fucking Sunday."

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EVENT

Xbox 360 prepares to take the stage

Microsoft's assertive prelaunch event exhibits all kinds of Dutch courage, but are the cracks beginning to show?

Decked in overpowering white and expressed via pin-sharp digital displays, X05 was a shrine to **Peter Moore**'s 'zen of gaming' and **J Allard**'s high-fidelity dream that proved less a place of worship than an opportunity to test your faith. The concerns of the invited guests (plucked liberally from both specialist and mainstream press and corporate partners) were reflected in the opening evening's extravagances – a visibly unrehearsed circus rope act and DJ sets from Zero 7 and Mylo that couldn't have come cheap, but saw practically no interest. While the thundering music wreaked havoc with the dwindling crowd's internal organs, the hundred or so HD-enabled demo pods instead took their toll, for many at least, on the reputation of 360's rush to retail.

As well as almost boiling its attendees alive, an opening presentation in Amsterdam's Westergasfabriek industrial complex served up a series of speeches from the brand's public faces peppered with curious terminology (Allard, tellingly, likes to "drill into" his menus rather than merely enter them), energised evangelism and, promisingly, dozens of games. Allard's rhetoric – besotted as it always has been with the systemic integration of gamers into a personalised community – revitalised our concerns over its mentality, while the overly aggressive tone of the evening quickly lost its zing. There were announcements and trailers, notably id chairman Todd Hollenshead's announcement of a free-roaming *Wolfenstein* and a playful teaser for Ubisoft's *Splinter Cell 4*. A docile Peter Jackson confirmed via video that he and Fran Walsh would serve as executive producers on the Halo movie, though the associated involvement of Weta as its special effects house was of greater interest.

Later, however, as an enormous range of forthcoming titles were fired up – in many different stages of completion – around the converted gasholder's cylindrical interior, more questions were asked than answered. This was an underwhelming experience, firstly because few of the LCDs employed on the first night seemed to have been correctly calibrated, and secondly because not one of the demonstrated builds administered that knockout sensual blow that many were anticipating. How much of this was understandable misrepresentation, and how much was exposure of more serious issues?



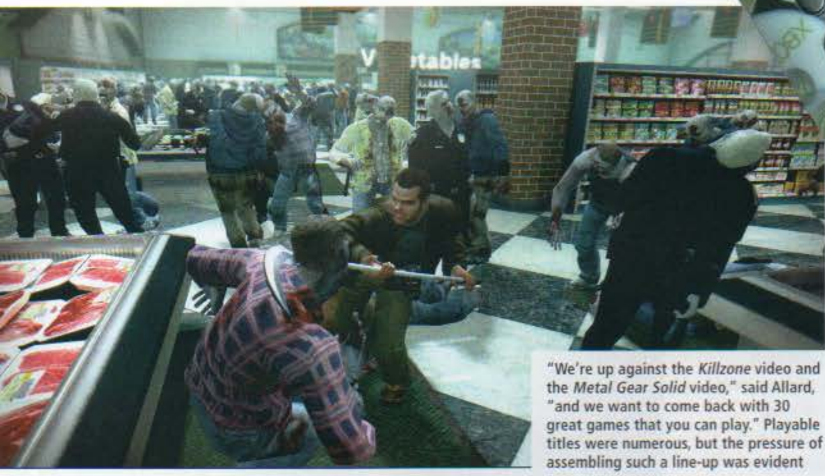
Via what must have been the most long-winded route possible for such a short distance, a trio of high-capacity canal boats ferried around 1,200 guests to the X05 venue. Members of the global specialist press were joined by mainstream news and business representatives

What exactly is a Microsoft-defined 'launch window'? According to Epic's Cliff Bleszinski, it's a year-long period following the launch of the machine itself

Come the event's more intimate second day, the inevitable focus was the precise nature of the system's first wave of software. Beyond the routine requests for a firm list of day-one launch titles, the real issue was one of semantics – what exactly is a Microsoft-defined 'launch window'? According to Cliff Bleszinski, presenter and lead designer of Epic's striking *Gears Of War* (see page 40) it's a year-long period following the launch of the machine itself. As well as triggering a muted wave of hoots and chuckles across the room, this revelation powerfully reinforced suspicions that between Microsoft's network of architects, businessmen, producers and development partners, no consensus actually exists regarding which titles gamers should prime themselves for having acquired their new console. How wise a choice of language, we asked Allard, was it to brand a hotly anticipated game like *Gears Of War* a 'launch title' when the only launch that could realistically accompany it would be that of PlayStation 3? "We've tried to say that the launch







"We're up against the *Killzone* video and the *Metal Gear Solid* video," said Allard, "and we want to come back with 30 great games that you can play." Playable titles were numerous, but the pressure of assembling such a line-up was evident

window is this holiday – that's the vernacular that we use," he explained. "I've never positioned *Gears Of War* as a launch title, and I hope we never have. If there's confusion, then our bad."

So what of the games that in the team's own presentation *were* positioned as launch titles? Which games can eager 360 owners expect to be enjoying on that first day, or even unwrapping on Christmas morning? "I couldn't tell you," replied Moore, "for the simple reason that I don't know yet. There'll be about 15-20 titles that are candidates – games we think are final, which then have to go into certification, testing and finally into production. Are they all going to make it? No. Do I *need* 20 titles? No. When PS2 went to launch, you had *Fantavision* if I remember rightly and a few games that didn't matter. I can tell you right now that *Kameo, Perfect Dark Zero, Dead Or Alive 4* and *Project Gotham Racing* are all very good candidates for day one. But until they pass testing, who can say for sure?"

"There isn't a game on 360 that you can't play without a hard drive, so I think that's a *good* thing for consumers"

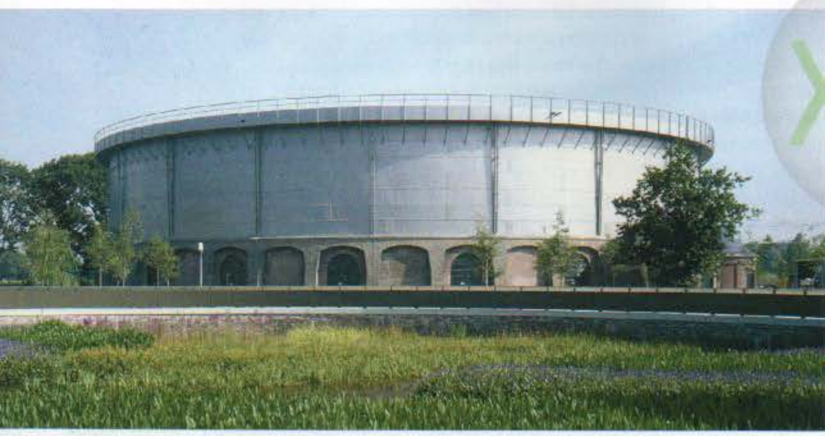
"There's so much on the line for these developers," continued Allard, "with the investments they've made. Taking *Call Of Duty* as an example: the value of that franchise to Activision, the amount of money they've poured into it, the quality of the experience and the potential that game has is such that they shouldn't rush that out. They're incredibly motivated to be there on day one and they want to be, but I don't think they'll rush it for three weeks if they need those three weeks. We'll do the same thing in firstparty. It's not that we want to be non-committal, but I don't want to say that *Project Gotham Racing*, for example, is going to be there on day one. I will say that it's looking good for this holiday, for sure, but if it's not ready then we won't jump the gun."

Gotham, incidentally, was the last game at X05 we were expecting to be disappointed by, but a poor choice of demonstration build meant that its playable code was a step below the killer app with which Bizarre and Microsoft have proudly teased the gaming community. This was, we were told, an 85-per-cent-complete version of a game that Bizarre believes *will* be hitting shelves alongside 360 itself. Sadly, however, a poor framerate and a bug that prevented certain textures upgrading in resolution as they neared the player left a tainted impression. The bug's said to have been fixed already, and we've no doubt that Bizarre will lock down a framerate – most probably 30fps as opposed to 60 – by the time the game goes gold.

How, we then asked, did Allard regard the suggestion that both developers and consumers had been let down by the removal of that guarantee of a hard drive in every console? "There isn't a game on 360 that you can't play without a hard drive," he replied with a perplexed furrow of his brow, "so I think that's a *good* thing for consumers. You have different price points and different ways of entering the category as a gamer, so I think that's also a good thing for consumers. From a developer point of view, you have the best tools and the commitment of the most well-resourced company in the world going worldwide with this product and saying that we want to grow the audience. So that seems like a win for developers – I'm not sure who's supposed to be disappointed."



Guests waiting for the opening night's presentation were treated to a puzzling array of glamorised 360s, produced by various artists from around the world. The remix generation theme was upheld by Allard's subsequent Xbox Live demo



Little of the Westergasfabriek complex – less than a mile from the centre of Amsterdam – was wasted by X05. The gasholder (left) played host to a quite awful Joanna Dark circus rope routine



It was clear that no one knew quite what to make of *Perfect Dark Zero*. The two levels on show, together with an accompanying multiplayer test, suggested an entirely enjoyable game with tight, well-calibrated controls and great draw distance for an FPS. Its overly glossy appearance and often straightforward action, however, failed to complete the next-gen picture

X05



Japanese titles such as From's *Chrome Hounds* and Phantagram's *Ninety Nine Nights* were represented by playable builds, the former stirring up some quite captivating battles when played correctly, the latter instead raising concerns over its showy combo harvest design and very minimalist environments





We elaborated with the examples of Allard's established vision of 360's online potential, and of *Saint's Row* developer Volition – home to a team publicly troubled by the lack of hard drive streaming in its free-roaming project. Allard's response was frank, if somewhat contradictory: "Sometimes doing the right thing means doing the hard thing. Are there developers who are disappointed? Yeah, sure. I wish there was a hard drive and I wish there were four terabytes of memory. There are a lot of wishes that I have but at the end of the day we're trying to run a business, and you have to make those trade-offs. It was a difficult one – I was the biggest fan of the hard drive and its potential, but the problem is that we sold 22 million Xboxes and five, maybe ten million consumers just don't care about it. But we paid for it. So who pays for it this time? We can either ask the gamer to pay for it, pay for it ourselves or prove that there's enough value in it and have the gamer say: 'I *want* to pay for it' – I think that's the right model."

"Two years ago," Moore would later add, "we sat down with developers and told them not to develop games for the hard drive. Everything you're seeing here does not need it, and it looks pretty damn good. Unless you're willing to have a very technical conversation about compression and caching, the hard drive doesn't matter."

And he has a point. For all the claims that could be made about many of the titles on show, few could be said to have chugged while loading or displayed any notable concessions specific to the platform's configuration. As for *Saint's Row*, it's safe to say that consistent storage is the least of this shamelessly derivative, apparently soulless game's concerns. "I don't know what the algorithm is for hard drive loading versus non-hard drive loading," continued Moore. "It may well be that some developers decide to take the risk and develop games for the hard drive – MMOs, for example, are a different story. The consistent data that you need and the worlds that you're playing in mean it's better if that information can be stored somewhere, which is why at launch in Japan we'll only be shipping with the hard drive."



As well as revealing details of its Tiburon studio's Superman Returns adaptation, EA predictably boasted one of the largest software turnouts of the event. Its trailer reel, however, featured the usual selection of faulty framerates and phoney footage

As the day offered further opportunities to probe developers, we continued to push the hard drive question to those on the front lines of the system's development push. **Olivier Dauba**, producer of *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* (a game said to be only 65 per cent complete and almost unrecognisable compared to its celebrated earlier appearances), was philosophical: "Has it made a difference? Has it made things harder? Yes, but we've known about it from the beginning, so we've been able to deal with it." Over at its demonstration of sci-fi epic *Mass Effect* – a vaguely convincing, narrative-heavy blend of *KOTOR* and original IP – Bioware had a similar outlook. "We used the hard drive an enormous amount on our



Great depression

The failure of many titles to shine at X05 gave titles such as Condemned a chance to impress

Garnering plenty of attention on the showfloor was Monolith's *Condemned* – a game that's put more thought than most into how innovatively 360's power can be employed. Currently undermined by the same reliance upon crude normal maps experienced by most next-gen developers, the grimy thriller has at least conjured itself a potent ambience of desolation and despair. Its inventory of forensic devices certainly shakes up the genre's default loadout, and what little we saw of its brutal melee combat broke new ground in that particular field. Popping into its start menu, meanwhile, the presence of a custom soundtrack option reminded us of the feature's omnipresence in 360 titles – a creative debate is just waiting to erupt over that one.



Microsoft clearly put the call out to its development partners to have their games ready for one form of presentation or other, the result being a mixture of everything from early screens to playable code. From top: Eden's *Alone In The Dark*, Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, Bizarre's *PGR3*, Capcom's *Dead Rising*, Volition's *Saint's Row* and 2K Sports' *Amped 3*











Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter made its first appearance in playable form, though the difference between this and earlier demonstrations was enormous. Full of placeholder assets and without much-needed antialiasing, the game resembled a medium-quality PC title at best







previous games," remarked project director **Casey Hudson**. "Obviously, we can't rely on it being there now, but there are a few changes that we've made that explore new solutions the 360 hardware presents – the ability to use memory units, for example. You have to be a little bit more crafty in some ways in order to get the same kind of features, but it's still possible and we're getting there."

Of the assembled press's hostility over various issues, it was Moore who seemed to bear the brunt, though to his credit he fielded the questions with general assuredness. With accusations of unreliable purchase intent statistics and Trojan horse sales tactics flying about a session packed with jaded Frenchmen (the schedule wasn't without its improvisations), Moore retaliated with talk of regional tax variations, localised market strategies and the doom-laden scenario of Sony's overpriced PSX. "When you have one per cent market share," he said of 360's bargain-priced Japanese launch bundle, "pricing it out of the reach of consumers is not the best thing to do."

Though a number of Japanese guests (representing both press and development communities) were dotted about the event, this final

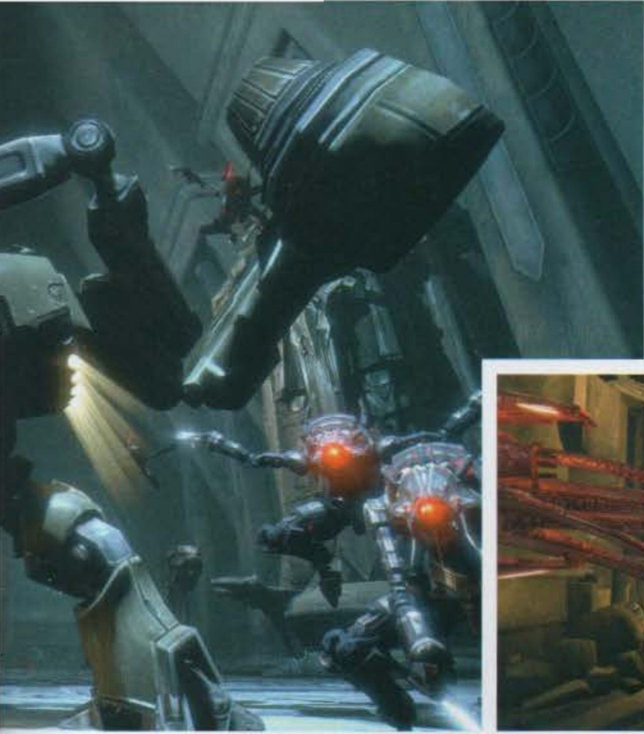
"We're going to break even on the hardware, but we'll make money on peripherals and plenty of money on games, much of which we'll put back into brand development"

push was clearly a western affair. No one was particularly keen to acknowledge 360's tepid reception at this year's TGS, and for all the notes jotted for the benefit of readers, few specialist press reporters successfully hid their desire to know when *they*, specifically, would get their next-generation ticket. As one Japanese delegate walked despondently from a keyboard-enabled *Final Fantasy XI* (we never did find out why, exactly), it became clear that Xbox's Asian salvation was an issue far beyond the reach of its launch in those territories, and probably beyond its entire launch window (even Bleszinski's version of it). At least, as Allard gleefully declared, if Microsoft does ship a unit or two in the east, it won't this time be faced with the cruel irony of money lost.

"The thing we didn't have with the original Xbox programme was that we didn't manufacture our own parts – we still don't, but we actually manage all the silicon," said Allard. "We can manage the cost of the programme and its price. Last time, we used chips from Nvidia and Intel and had a hard drive in every system, and we had to match Sony's price. That's a really crappy place to be in. This time, our cost will be more reflective of our price, and more similar to what Sony, Nintendo and Sega have previously been able to do. Roughly, in business terms, we're going to break even on the hardware, but we'll make money on peripherals and plenty of money on games, much of which we'll put back into brand development, marketing and innovation."

To Allard's credit, the games were most certainly here – a considerable turnout for a prelaunch preview that cast its eye far beyond the machine's opening season. Representatives of every distinct tier of quality were playable, each boasting its own definition of what it means to be high-definition. From the single core facelifts such as *King Kong*, *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* and *Gun* to the more ambitious, dedicated attempts at wielding some of the machine's enormous power, here was a telling overview of an industry still a long way from determining a suitable look for the HD era. The application of trailing-edge techniques was every bit as noticeable as that of cutting-edge tools, and many of next-gen's potential console pioneers have understandably twiddled 360's more convenient knobs and dials while suspending any notable exploration of its new frontier.

Take *Ridge Racer 6*, for example – one of many games at the show still represented by its TGS build, and one that still equates to *Ridge Racer V* viewed through better-manufactured lenses (or alternatively *Ridge Racers* viewed through a telescope). Visually, *Amped 3* is a hi-res facsimile of its predecessor, and while 2K's *Top Spin 2* at least offers near-facsimiles of its real-life stars, the lack of any facial animation is a lingering concern. EA and Ubisoft, meanwhile, are two publishers willing



X05

Silicon Knights' sci-fi actioner *Too Human* has finally (it seems) settled on a host platform having been in development since 1993. Now, like Bioware RPG *Mass Effect*, it wants to be a trilogy





and able to pinch the generation gap to the point where they can stroll across with a handful of promptly delivered, modestly adjusted ports. The newly announced *FIFA 06: Road To The World Cup* is as casual an upgrade as could be either expected or imagined, shrinkwrapping its players with a suffocating layer of makeup and foregoing the engine overhaul that, in times long gone, would have formed the bedrock of any next-gen debut. *King Kong* has, similarly, thrown a bucket of water effects over its current-gen version and little else.

With such a gulf existing between the ports and the premium products, X05 offered an insight into just how far a game has to go to satisfy that nurtured perception of the next generation – one of a visual experience almost indistinguishable from a prerendered cutscene, so meticulously crafted that not one jagged edge or coarse texture can burst its illusionary bubble. The effort required to batten down such a standard of production is colossal, and while *PGR3* should hopefully offer an early taste, it's going to be some time before other titles such as *Gears Of War* and *Advanced Warfighter* can guarantee the same totality of polish.

And on top of this, let's remember that this is the most hurried launch of a major console in history, imposed upon developers still far from realising the full potential of its predecessor. It's an incredible undertaking that, all possible disappointments considered, will still eclipse in scale and ambition the usual measured debut. But Amsterdam has shown us how little Xbox's breezy new image can bleach the timid developer reports of seven-day working weeks that leave few hours free of coding. Thinly spread at the best of times, the veil of assuredness draped across the myriad demo pods of X05 frequently exposed the underlying agony of frantic toil. This ethereal tension was, in fact, no less unprecedented than the volume of playable titles, and awkwardly opposed to the theme of the brand and the brashness of the event.

Ninja theory

The rushed nature of X05 meant that its more modest titles came out looking the smoothest

Thanks largely to the progress made by its engine throughout its last era, *Dead Or Alive 4* looked crisper than most on the hastily erected displays, focusing its attention on details such as believable clothing textures, hair and cloth physics rather than uprooting its visual style. It plays host to a snappier fight than before, even if the stop/start flow of its combat remains immediately noticeable and, for many, a blight on its overall appeal. Though the recent announcement of a *Halo* character (widely expected to be Cortana) joining its cast has given its profile a last-minute boost, it'll be interesting to see just how large a wardrobe the game offers given the series' dubious reputation for drip-feeding content to its fans.

Much of Allard's presentation was dedicated to the functionality and potential of Xbox Live Arcade, tied like every other game developed for 360 into the online Gamerscore system. Keeping track of all of your in-game achievements, this new feature should cause all kinds of headaches for developers forced to quantify their players' ability









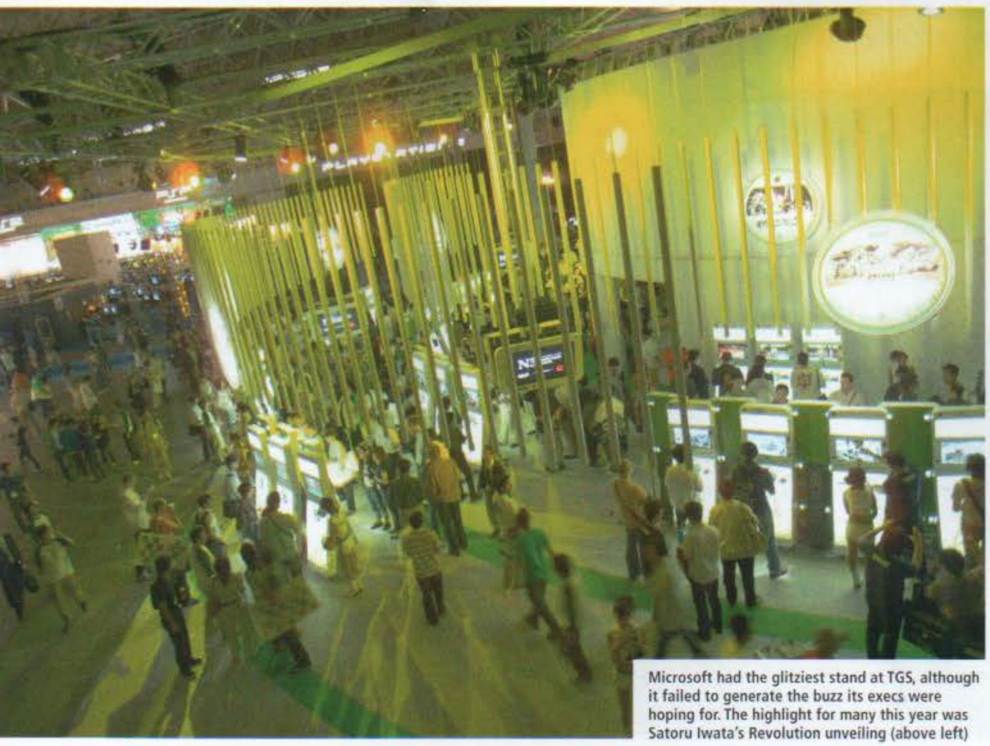


EVENT



Sony has an easy ride at Tokyo Game Show 2005

With Xbox 360 running in circles, the path was clear for PS3 MGS4 and a new wave of PSP titles to reinforce the leader's position at Japan's gaming expo



Microsoft had the glitziest stand at TGS, although it failed to generate the buzz its execs were hoping for. The highlight for many this year was Satoru Iwata's Revolution unveiling (above left)

The Japanese videogame industry may be in decline, but public attendance was again on the rise at September's event, with 16,000 visitors in excess of 2004's record numbers. For many, it was more of a hardware show, expecting appearances by two of the three next-gen consoles: expectations that would not be entirely fulfilled.

Microsoft's preshow conference curiously showed the same lack of rapport that dogged the first Xbox's debut in the territory, despite the company's insistence that it had learned from those mistakes. It was characterised by the decision to show an audience expecting

Microsoft's preshow conference showed the same lack of rapport that dogged the first Xbox's debut in Japan, despite its insistence that it had learned from those mistakes

significant new local titles – or trophy franchises such as *Gundam* or *Ridge Racer 6* – a lengthy *Gears Of War* presentation instead. Epic's Cliff Bleszinski's enthusiasm (and his translator's best efforts) were lost on clearly disinterested attendees, some going so far as to pick apart the early build's framerate and animation issues. The announced December 10 launchday line-up of seven titles, with the most alluring likely to be *DOA4* and *RR6*, also failed to impress – and presentation of Mistwalker's two epic RPGs was deferred to later in the year.

Microsoft was no doubt expecting a tough crowd (with media, analysts, dealers and a scattering of developers in attendance), but a closing statement that Japan would be a 'key market' for the 360



Sony's PS3 demo reel included (clockwise from top left) Factor 5's *Lair*, SCEE Liverpool's *Formula One*, a teaser for Ubisoft's *POP* team's new project, *Assassin* (working title), Game Republic's *Genji 2*, an updated *Vision Gran Turismo*, and a target render of Sega's new *Sonic* (also for 360, with identical video shown). Also present, but not pictured, was in-engine prototype footage from Incognito's aerial shooter, *Warhawk*

triggered an uncommonly harsh cross-examination. Several media representatives asked for Microsoft marketing supremo Peter Moore to take the stage and answer questions, but the harried Japanese officials stood their ground while Moore watched from the sidelines.

All present criticised the 360's ¥39,000 (£195) pricing – to politely rephrase one journalist, with the Xbox's failure and the new machine's relatively unappealing line-up, only the pricing could have been in the 360's favour. A lower pricepoint would have also troubled Sony's launch, whereas several dealers felt Sony now has carte blanche to introduce its PS3 at around ¥55,000 (£275), with the ¥15,000 difference chalked up to higher quality and more desirable titles.

The fixed inclusion of the hard drive – Japan will not initially be offered a Core System pack – also attracted criticism, many feeling that Microsoft had unnecessarily raised the pricetag for the sake of capitulating to Square-Enix's support with *FFXI*. Questioned on exactly how high-definition the Hi-Def Era would be, Microsoft also confirmed that the console was not natively compatible with the digital high-resolution HDMI standard – while PS3 is touted to have an extravagant two HDMI ports.

Unfavourable reports from the 360's Japanese Inquisition may not have reached the public by the opening of TGS's doors, but Microsoft's sizeable booth still attracted only passing interest. Again, the playable line-up was of questionable local appeal, and even laser-targeted efforts such as *Ninety-Nine Nights* produced fairly reserved queues. *DOA4* was also absent, though this was Tecmo's decision rather than Microsoft's – director Tomonobu Itagaki choosing to instead hold a playable press event in a nearby hotel. With the exception of a small plaque assuring passers-by that the 360 would fit into any buyer's home (during preshow preparation, Microsoft officials could be seen patrolling the showfloor to ensure any booths with playable 360 units kept the hefty power adapters out of sight), it was a directionless showing in an event where the machine needed all possible momentum.

However, if Microsoft failed to storm Japan over the space of a show, it at least made some headway in breaking the PlayStation's hold on popular franchises, with *Armored Core* and *Way Of The Samurai* joining the previously announced *Ridge*, *Gundam* and *Final Fantasy* 360 titles. Microsoft Japan's objective, for the moment, appears to be simply to carve a firmer foothold









Surprisingly little prominence was given to the 360's local support, including Taito's new *Energy Airforce* game *World Airforce*, Konami's *Rumble Roses Double X* (with restored customisation and relationship features cut from the PS2 version), the eternally unsung Xbox supporter From Software's *Enchant Arm*, and Game Republic's *Every Party* – itself an obvious choice to throw open the doors of 360's wider appeal



360 peripherals shown included a *DOA4*-branded fighting stick. Though beat 'em up snobs may scoff at the idea of *DOA* needing a stick, the new title has finally undergone a mechanic overhaul, tightening counter windows and improving the ground game

there, and there's potential for this to strengthen in time – not least because the Japanese industry may need the 360 more than the 360 needs Japan.

On the showfloor, while the 360 was tangibly present and running more than a dozen playable titles, it was left struggling against the swell of hype from its competitors-to-be. Iwata's startling keynote and a typically auteur *Metal Gear Solid 4* trailer both effortlessly upstaged Microsoft's performance, with Sony in particular getting an easy show for the second time running. Attendees were still bitterly disappointed by the PS3's absence – and this no-show's suggestion that the console itself was far from completion – but realtime asset demonstrations from *Gundam* and *MGS4* kept the love affair alive.

On the handheld front, though, it was the opposite situation for Sony. If the DS wasn't present in an official capacity, other than a spread of thirdparty titles, it was overwhelmingly present in the minds and hands of the public. The high number of DS-wielding attendees was notable throughout the conference centre, and opening Pictochat would find it buzzing with omnidirectional conversation.

The concept of wireless downloads had also taken hold at TGS, with connectivity options for both handhelds present on the show floor. The explosion of the PSP's previously scarce game-sharing feature required Sony staff constantly on hand to help showgoers configure and correctly download demos, whereas the concentration of DS downloads at Sega's booth was, as ever, popular and painless.

In addition to game sharing, the second wave of PSP titles showed a more confident reliance on





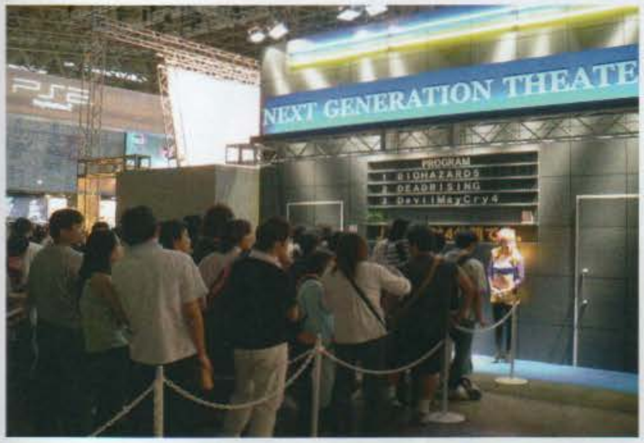
The hostile reception at the previous day's press event might explain why Microsoft Japan's Shinichi Manaka and Epic's Cliffy B both looked a little hesitant at Bach's keynote

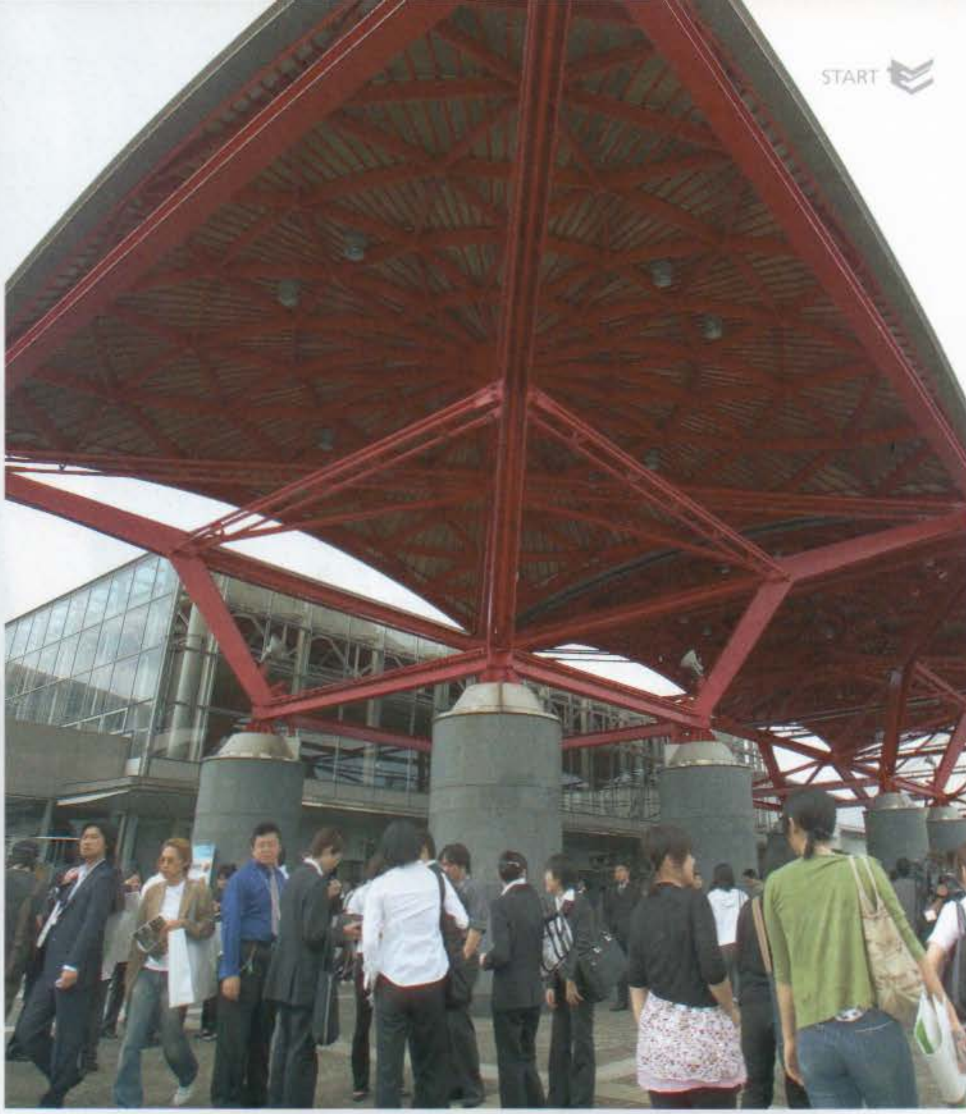
The high number of DS-wielding attendees was notable throughout the conference centre, and opening Pictochat would find it buzzing with omnidirectional conversation

ad-hoc multiplay, with Capcom's startlingly accurate *Monster Hunter* at the forefront. As well as the widescreen presentation's improved peripheral vision, its multiplay is of course free, compared to the pay-to-play service of the PS2 original, and communication with other players is somewhat more natural. Natural, perhaps, but not common: nearly a year after launch it's still rare to find PSP owners in the wild, and even more so to find those willing for unplanned wireless play.

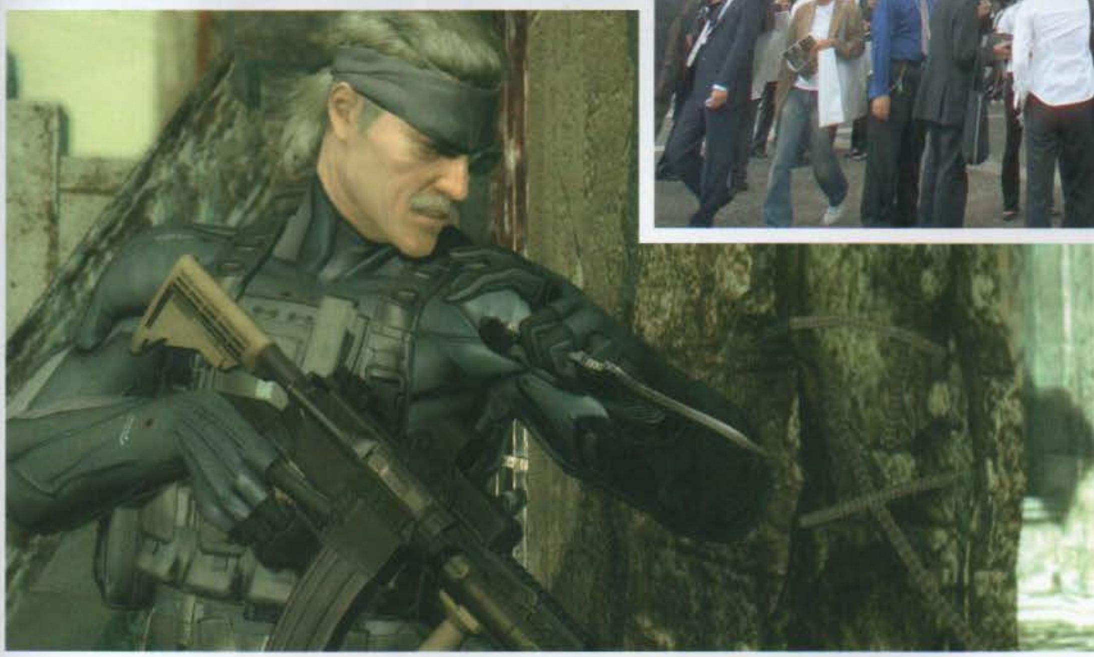
Still, PSP gamers subsisting on a trickle of releases had come to TGS looking for any second wave they could find, and the 31 titles shown seemed to satisfy with their diversity – if not with surefire killer applications. Finally steering away from straight PS2 ports of gamer's games, titles such as Namco's 'vacation simulator' *Portable Resort*, or SCEI's long-delayed Talkman translator and puzzle platformer *Loco Roco* (quickly declared the show darling), offered new directions for the console. Highlights of the more traditional line-up included *Metal*







The conference centre was at its busiest on the public days, although the atmosphere inside remained relaxed – if nevertheless deafening – even in the thick of the queues for freebies such as Sega's *Feel The Magic* sequel *Where Do Babies Come From?* sticker sheets



Gear Acid 2, showing a much stronger use of card game mechanics, and *Monster Kingdom*, the first RPG from newly independent *Shin Megami Tensei* creator Koji Okada.

If Sega's large booth and lengthy list of titles promised a confidence similar to its arcade division's performance at the JAMMA show, the reality was somewhat more subdued. Interestingly, many titles under the Sega banner were developed outside of the company, suggesting that Sega the developer is progressively becoming Sega the publisher. A large amount of internal titles were based on thirdparty licences, with the only standout new title being the PS2's *Shenmue*-like *Ryu Ga Gotoku*. Despite the obvious influence of Yu Suzuki's cult favourite, Sega intends to position the game as a local *GTA* – although the level of violence is much more limited, and the supposed antihero is in fact a misunderstood traditional hero.



Featuring Hideo Kojima's usual self-referential humour (obvious digs included Cell, the *MGS* series' camera perspective, and the E3 *Killzone* trailer), the *MGS4* teaser (main) packed a punch. With an aged Snake hunted by mechanised infantry through an urban warzone, it was clear the next-gen incarnation would not be just another *Metal Gear*. Meanwhile, smaller games like Capcom's new PSP *Rockman* title (above) struggled to attract attention

Newswire



California clampdown

Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's signing of AB1179 – a Californian bill aimed at toughening mature game classifications and restrictions – has triggered a wave of debate among gamers and a backlash from retail. Affected US stores will be required to check the ID of anyone purchasing a game deemed violent enough to warrant a warning label, with a potential $1,000 fine for those who fail to comply. The Entertainment Software Association, having spearheaded a move to sue the governor of Illinois mere months ago for passing similar legislation, had this to say: "When it is struck down by the courts, as has been the fate of similar statutes, parents will be no better off for this effort to damage one of the state's fastest growing and most exciting industries."

SOUND BYTES

"Why is Mizuguchi not here? He's *busy*"
The dam bursts at X05 as **Peter Moore** fields the last of a French reporter's questions

"The Core pack has been called the 'tard' pack, as in that's what your mom is if she buys you this for Christmas."
The New York Post provides much-needed validation of Microsoft's cost-cutting strategy

<barneytheterrible>
Is that movie of God of War gonna follow the game, or is it going to be dumb and go by a different story?
<davidjaffe>
I think the plan is to make it dumb and go by a different story. We are hoping to just lose as much cash as we can and fail in a big way. Enjoy!
David Jaffe responds quite candidly to the videogame-to-movie issue on his blog chat

"I always enjoy going someplace and talking to smart people about games... but time you're in the air without a net connection is time you are not Building Shareholder Value, which is of course what we live for."
Greg Kostikyan on the early days of his money-where-his-mouth-is startup, Manifesto Games

"It's difficult to recall interactive entertainment before the PlayStation came along."
The Guardian reveals that it didn't much care for things like the 8bit or 16bit gaming eras

"The best videogames – as all but those involved in the process of 'upholding' the nation's moral standards know – are those that let you do things you never would in real life, due to the risk of social disapproval... or jail."
More from **The Guardian**, clarifying its stance on why the likes of *Tetris* just don't really cut it any more



Nintendo seems determined to keep the focus off Miyamoto and on the Revolution – relagating him to an audience seat for Iwata's keynote





Tecmo's Itakgaki was in typical form at *DOA4*'s exclusive showing, here providing a photograph ripe for Photoshop manipulation into a gesture more fitting of his persona

Sega Rally 2005 made its second TGS appearance, now renamed to *SR2006* and arriving in the new year. Its team – still at around a dozen developers, hardly the numbers expected for the *SR* brand – have continued to improve the handling and visuals, but the game was wholl y eclipsed in audience interest by PSP port *Initial D Street Stage*.

Sonic was also hoisted back to mascot status, with a confused variety of vehicles perhaps indicative of Sega's development arm in general. Inexplicable gun-toting spin-off *Shadow The Hedgehog*, hoverboard title *Sonic Riders* and a next-gen target render of a core Sonic game all felt devoid of real spark – only *Sonic Rush* on the DS seems to have tapped the original game's endearing shallowness.



After three years' development and nearly all the PS2's lifespan, Level 5's *Rogue Galaxy* nears completion: with the final version containing even more optional complexities than *Dark Chronicle*, it may pose the question of how much content is too much

Elsewhere, it was a PS2 show again – likely the last time the machine would dominate the TGS, although several publishers seemed present to mark this occasion only in spirit. Most notably, a meek Square Enix showing provided few titles and fewer announcements (though the eternally delayed *FFXII* has received its final setback to March 2006). Konami's focus was on *Metal Gear*, both next-gen and in the *Subsistence* re-release of *MGS3*, and Namco's – appearing largely unchanged by the recent Bandai Namco partnership – was on its 360 launch titles and growing PSP line-up. Capcom's booth was one of the most constantly busy of the show, confirming its place as a developer basking in the generation's twilight. The

The playable demo of its PSP *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* title commanded hour-long queues, and *Okami*'s Japanese public debut received a tremendous welcome

playable demo of its PSP *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* title commanded hour-long queues, and *Okami*'s Japanese public debut received a tremendous welcome, exhausting stocks of demo discs several times over.

Sony's own PS2 support saw Level 5's *Rogue Galaxy* positioned as a seemingly capable heir to the RPG crown in Square Enix's absence, and *Siren 2* drew attention, coinciding with a resurgence of interest in Japanese horror cinema. Players grappling in both senses with a near-final *Shadow Of The Colossus* appeared a little overwhelmed, with *Ico* fans stumped by that game's limited combat now facing a far stiffer challenge – but the demo stations were seldom empty.

Overall, it was another wait-and-see event: it's next year, when Nintendo and Sony's machines will join Microsoft's in an entirely new Tokyo gaming landscape, that the games will have everything to prove again.



Even after heated internet debate over what *Metal Gear Acid 2*'s 'Solid Eye' would entail, few predicted the rather cumbersome bundled 3D scope attachment

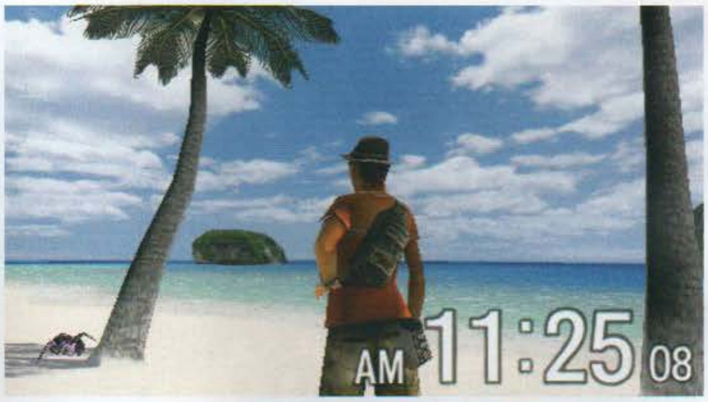




Despite Nintendo's traditional absence from TGS – a strategy it might do well to reconsider – the DS had a strong showing at the event, thanks largely to Sega, with the temptation of *Super Monkey Ball* and the world-domination-in-waiting of *Mushi King*











Offerings in the PSP's second wave included (clockwise from top left) Capcom's notably considered *Monster Hunter Portable*, the soothingly listless *Portable Resort* (complete with virtual ukulele mode), SCEI's Talkman translation tool, attending its second TGS, and *My, My Katamari Damacy* – making good on Keita Takahashi's desire to make the world a better place with its post-tsunami clean-up theme – from Namco



INTERVIEW

Wolf tales



Clover's Atsushi Inaba discusses style with substance, and the art of not making art games

It's been one-and-a-half years since we last spoke to Clover Studio head **Atsushi Inaba** (left), at the time announcing both his studio and its startling PS2 title *Okami* (see **E**138). Even then, *Okami* was the product of a lengthy development, but the time since has seen its gameplay and visuals continue to evolve and impress. We found Inaba looking every bit the proud parent at Capcom's TGS showing.

Has it been much of a fight coaxing *Okami's* visuals out of the ageing PS2?

Sure, it's always an issue when you want to make a game deliver its full potential after you start hitting the hardware limitations. But this game isn't about technical issues, it's about an aesthetic. That's the real challenge – the programmers have to really work to make the designers' artwork a living reality onscreen.

With a game so focused on the aesthetic, were you prepared for criticisms that it would be a case of style over substance?

Our objective was never to 'make art', even if people take our work as an artistic approach. When we decide on a certain visual feature, we try to introduce it as a gaming mechanic. If we didn't, like you say, there's no substance – and I know many games that are prioritising the visuals over the experience, although I don't understand why. Our approach at Clover is to make a videogame to be played and be fun.

Did working with an animal character – not just a sidekick or transformation mode – have any effect on the way that you approached the game?

We have a lot of experience with action games, and never really thought it would make it more difficult to make a wolf a fun playable character. Quite the opposite – it made things more interesting, as it offered us new ways to portray game experiences, quite different from the standard human heroes of other games.

Of course, you find yourself limited in some cases – a wolf cannot open a door like a human would. But in any game... if you look at *Biohazard* you never see the hero actually eating the green herb to restore his health. So you show only the actions that suit or add to the feel of your character. That was our approach to the wolf from the beginning: the important actions are shown to the player while others are just supposed.

It seems some of the most important actions are the paintbrush techniques. How did that design come about?

It came from [Hideki] Kamiya. He worked on it for quite some time – as I explained before, a game that just had an original look wasn't our objective with *Okami*, it wouldn't have been enough. We needed to make the gaming experience worthwhile, so we gave this a lot of thought, and found several ideas that provided a good game experience and matched the visual style. The brush was selected as the central concept of the game, as it fitted the concept of the wolf being a god, and of course of the Japanese art style, but also brought a very humorous touch with the wolf using her tail.

So Kamiya had a very challenging task, to find this great idea which would define the entire



Concept art has had a profound influence on the in-game visuals – the world doesn't just replicate the paintings, but catches them being painted













While the effects for the rejuvenative powers of Amaterasu's actions have changed many times over the game's development, they've never been in danger of looking less than stunning



game, to make it more than a beautiful visual experience but a true and funny gaming experience. And I had a very difficult task to wait for him to come up with the idea [laughs] – while I was dealing with the timescale and financial aspects of development.

So far, we've seen the brush used chiefly to solve specific puzzles. Can you talk about any other actions that are possible?

It's not just for puzzle solving – there's also a lot of exploration involved in the use of the brush. There are around 13 different brush techniques, and inside those, different ways to use them. We're creating lots of situations to ensure the player never sees it as a chore or a gimmick, and can expand its possibilities naturally just from using it.

As you said before, *Okami*'s staff have a lot of action game experience. How involved do you plan on making the combat?

It was actually one of the last things we developed – our experience gave us confidence we would arrive on a suitable system when we needed to. We've really only started to work on the combat mechanics recently. It began with a few obvious moves, and then we added other techniques, like when the wolf bites and grabs an adversary to throw them in the air. Then we started to use the disc on the wolf's back as a weapon. I think it's a very fun fighting system with a lot of variety – I'm confident we've got something really cool here for both casual players and experienced gamers.

The last time we spoke, we asked if you were concerned about the prospects of original titles in the current gaming climate. How do you view *Okami*'s prospects now?

"Making 100 per cent original content is very hard to sell, so you start from things you already know, concepts players are comfortable with, and then apply a refreshing vision"

It's certainly difficult to make one original title after another, but I draw an analogy with the iPod. Listening to music is nothing new, and there are many digital music players on the market – there were many before the first iPod. What made the difference for Apple was the design, and the combination with iTunes: something very new, and very appealing. Making 100 per cent original content is very hard to sell, so you start from things you already know, concepts players are comfortable with, and then apply a refreshing vision which makes those old concepts appealing again. That's the path I want to take with Clover. Playing games is nothing new, and there are many games on the market – many games basically like ours – but the vision and approach we apply makes the difference.



The tasks feel a little light – a dialogue box, a splash of paint-by-numbers and move on – but their relevance is as moments in a story rather than puzzles



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

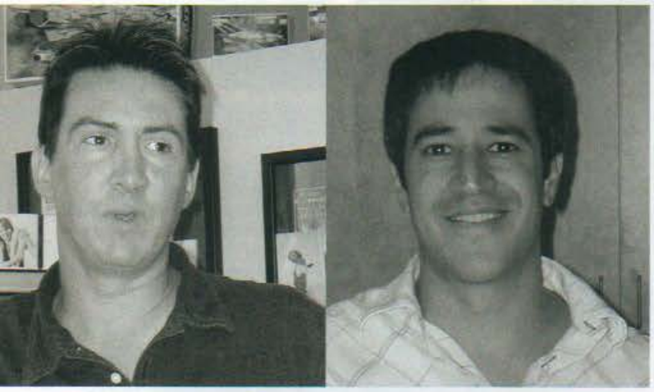
Surely the most exhaustive – if not probably the only – site of its type, yadayo8's massive database of movies and the games that they've 'inspired' is both a testament to sly culture jamming and remixing as well as damning documentation of lazy design. As you travel through its pages you'll note, apart from the overstated and obvious references like every shark attack harkening back to Jaws, of Sega's wholesale lifting of River Phoenix's face from A Night In The Life Of Jimmy Reardon for *Rent-A-Hero*'s character portrait, of a *Space Harrier* boss with a startling resemblance to The Neverending Story's Falkor, and in general just how subtle, dense and diverse the parody in Irem's *Photo-boy* really is.

Site:
Movie inspirations
URL:
www.geocities.jp/yadayo8/eiga

INTERVIEW

A widespread condition

Perpetuating its publisher polygamy, Pandemic can be nobody's man. Here, its senior creatives explain themselves



Development lead Wil Stahl (left) and company president Josh Resnick typify Pandemic's refreshingly candid and open-minded attitude toward the gamemaking process

The most modest of mavericks, California's Pandemic Studios is the history-writing survivor of Activision's big exodus seven years ago. Since then, it has defied publishing convention and developed for former boss Activision, EA, LucasArts, 3DO, THQ, and, with *Full Spectrum Warrior*, the US army. We asked company president **Josh Resnick** and *Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers* (previewed on page 32) lead **Wil Stahl** what it is they do with this independence.

Not being tied to a particular publisher, do you think Pandemic has a greater sense of autonomy then other developers?

Josh Resnick: Absolutely. We're very strong believers in being fiercely independent. We want to be known as a very strong, independent developer that will form relationships with many different publishers where it makes sense.

It's important for us not to be a subsidiary of a publisher.

It's been a while since you developed for Activision. How is your relationship with the publisher now?

JR: It's an interesting history with us and Activision. We broke off and made a couple of games with them, and then haven't made any since. But that's just because we haven't had a team and a game at the right time to work with them. That's not intentional – it's just aligned that way. There's a lot of people we still have good relationships with, and Activision have a vested interest in us succeeding.



Stahl illustrates *Ten Hammers*' new features on the fly, demonstrating that the twofold increase in controls is manageable, even while being distracted by inquisitive journos



The original *Full Spectrum Warrior* was co-published by the army, with a simultaneously developed training version and retail version. How was the army as a publisher?

JR: It was a learning experience, both for us and for them. They'd never acted as a publisher before. On the other hand, I don't think *FSW* would have been made within a traditional developer-publisher relationship. The army gave us a lot of flexibility and latitude. They said: here's the problem, go solve it. We didn't have to fit into what previous games had done. That wasn't important to the army.

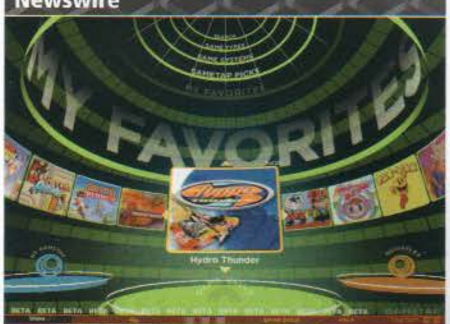
Famously, someone attempted to sabotage the original project, making claims that the army was not satisfied with the project, and it had wasted tax payers' money. Was there any follow-up to this?

Wil Stahl: That whole thing was spawned by a disgruntled person, who when given their snapshot of the game, the information was highly inaccurate. That was an unfortunate event – a combination of ignorance and arrogance.

JR: It was a totally bogus thing. He wasn't an employee of Pandemic. It's been totally dismissed, the judge threw it out. There was no substance to it, the government never picked it up because they concluded the same, and he's melted away into the wind, so to speak. [That's] the cost of doing business these days.

For *Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers*,

Newswire



GameTap goes live

Just over a month after Infinium Labs chairman Kevin Bachus announced the European launch of its Phantom (again failing to provide an exact date for its arrival in any territory), Turner Broadcasting launched its competing online service, GameTap. Offering unlimited play of classic games for various emulated systems, the software-based subscription service benefits from licensing deals with companies including Activision, Atari, Midway, Namco and Sega. Presuming (rather foolishly) that the Phantom will meet its intended 2005 street date, it'll be interesting to see which system, if either, consumers choose to embrace – the Phantom, which allows more recent PC games to be downloaded to dedicated hardware, or GameTap, with its versatile software solution.



Ten Hammers' chapter structure allows for a wider variety of locales than the first game, but will hopefully share its convincing sense of day falling to shadowed, sinister night



there's no army version. Has this make the development feel more vulnerable, or offered more freedom?

WS: I definitely feel freer. We miss a lot of the input in terms of the raw knowledge. But we worked with the army for four years – there's a lot of knowledge that we got from the first game that we haven't even managed to put into this one. The army was paying us to deliver them something, so we had to do whatever they demanded. So, say a new feature wasn't something they wanted, we wouldn't be able to include it, and odds were then that it wouldn't get into the retail version. Now we can put things in and we don't have to have the army sign off on them.

JR: We still have our ties to the military, and still have proper input to ensure it's authentic.

What part do you think fiction has in creating a realistic game?

JR: There's a fine line between authenticity and having that true game experience. The types of missions we had in *FSW1* were very different from those we had in the army version. We had to introduce a fiction, and you had to care about your characters more. There had to be a story arc and a mission arc. We already made a lot of choices back then, and we're continuing to push forward with that in *FSW:TH*. Having said that, I think we struck a really nice balance where we were able to maintain that high fidelity and authenticity but deliver a compelling gamer experience.

WS: I just hated in the first game that a guy gets shot about a hundred times, and kept getting back up and coming back into the game. If there's one thing that pulled the rug out from under our authenticity, it's that guys could never die. So this time, if someone gets shot down, they're not coming back.

Has the change in public perception of the situation in Iraq influenced the development of this second game?

JR: We've always been sensitive to that. We didn't want to trade on positive or negative feelings about a conflict going on. Our game was never about endorsing the army, or what the government was doing. We wanted to stay independent of that. A fictional story in a fictional setting. We never intended to drape this product in the American flag.

"There's a fine line between authenticity, and having that true game experience. The types of missions we had in *FSW1* were very different from those we had in the army version"

WS: In any modern military game right now, you have to be conscious of this. Are we trivialising things? Are we insulting Islam in some way? The conflict isn't based around current events. While we have to deliver to an audience what they want, are being perceived like we're trying to cash in? That's our worst fear, that people will think we're saying, "Hey, there's a war going on, let's try and make money from it."

So, tell us about Project Q.

WS: Flood the room! He's mentioned Project Q. Kssshhhhhhh.

OUT THERE



BRING OUT THE BAND



Originally conceived as a boredom-inspired Famicom tune cover band, the aptly named FamiComBand, or FCB, has, after a year-long hiatus, announced it has regrouped and will be playing new US shows again starting this October. What sets FCB apart from myriad other chiptune cover bands are their stage shows, perfectly recreating scenes from games synced in time to the music. Awkward though it may sound, if the entire show is as spot-on as the *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!* clip available on the band's website, we can only hope for more downloadable videos or a DVD.

● famicomband.org/movies/punchout.mov



INTERVIEW

Sounding the Siren

Sony's in-house horror series re-emerged from the shadows at TGS, as did its cult favourite creator





Though game director **Keiichiro Toyama** (above right) often shuns the spotlight – perhaps an irony considering its importance in his subject matter of choice – he has created two of the most intelligent and unsettling horror titles to date, in the original *Silent Hill* and *Siren*. While both games' successes have created their own sequels, *Siren 2* benefits from Toyama's continued direct involvement.

The new game opens with a series of characters arriving on the island of Yamigawa, abandoned for 29 years since its entire population vanished without trace during an electrical blackout. Of course, the playable characters find the island far from empty, haunted by both *Siren*'s familiar Shibito and a new race, the Yamibito, 'people of the dark'. Survival relies on manipulating light and darkness – the Shibito have poor night vision, whereas the Yamibito loathe light – and on a considerably more aggressive approach to combat. We spoke to Toyama about the opportunities for refining his horror that the sequel has provided.

Although there are familiar cues, you seem to be taking the feel of *Siren* in a very different direction with this sequel.

The first *Siren* had a very involved, very Japanese story about a cult, and I wanted to make a sequel that was almost a new game, with a feel that even overseas players could find some familiar references in. So we researched various western supernatural themes, and I was drawn to the story of the Marie Celeste – the ship that was found travelling without its crew.

You've still set the game in a Japanese environment, though.

Yes, we went to see the island we would use for reference ourselves – to gather materials during preparation of the game. It was actually a military base, a lethal gas manufacturing centre during the war, so there are many installations from that period of Japanese history – however, they serve only as background in the game, rather than having a role in the game's plot.

And that didn't affect the theme of the game at all? It seems much more military.

There's a different reason for that. Originally I wanted to offer a very calm but very horrifying experience, but I found that players approached *Siren* in a much different way – they saw it as an action game! That's still how it's thought of today. So I decided we would have a faster pace in the sequel. But it's a delicate balance, because if you



A *Siren* film is also entering production, with Toyama involved in the process – it too will be set under Yamigawa's brooding clouds and cloying shadows



It was difficult to get a feel for the more frequent combat's effect on play from the demo showing, but pronounced locational damage and savage melee combat feature







have too much action I think there's no room for horror, only fright, and I wanted it to be a horror experience. So I've made sure there are limits to the game's speed.

Have you achieved that by retaining *Siren*'s menu-driven action system?

We knew some players thought the menu system detracted from the game's tension, rather than increasing it, so actually this time we automate most of the obvious actions – for instance, you can open a door with a single button press. However, we chose to maintain a few sets of actions inside menus, such as those for communicating with other characters.

Were there any other issues from *Siren* you wanted to address?

Definitely the difficulty level. You see, we made the first *Siren* just on our own feelings, without really paying any attention to the market. The result was surprising, as it touched a large audience, especially female gamers – it was a very popular title among more casual users, and the feedback from them was always: "The game is just too difficult."

So this time we need to make the game accessible to those who don't play games so much, but are interested in a horror title. We have an easier difficulty, and a better tutorial. But I won't forget the core gamers, and I would like to offer them a deeper experience, perhaps with certain bonus features.

It certainly seems you're making some brave design choices again – we understand one of the playable characters is blind.

He has terrible vision, yes, and so you see the gameworld through the eyes of his guide dog. Each character will offer a different way to experience the horror, as they have their own abilities and limitations – for instance, the Japanese Defence Force soldier can handle weaponry the others can't. Also, a few of the characters have the ability to look into the past.

How is that ability used in the game?

It lets you see how the people of the island used to live, and gain a better understanding of the reasons behind some of the events in the present.

"*Siren* was our first PS2 title, so it was still very much a learning process. With this game, we remade our rendering engine to give a better impression of water, light and darkness"

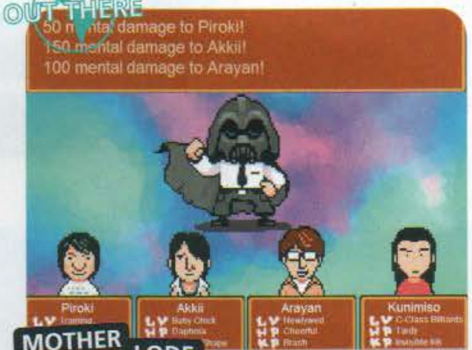
There are two time periods: one 29 years ago, and then another 19 years ago. Other than that, I can't really go into detail on this feature right now.

Both *Silent Hill* and *Siren* used the transitions from light to darkness to great effect, especially within the confines of their hardware. Do you see future hardware offering new possibilities, or simply more visually arresting ones?

Well, *Siren* was our first PS2 title, so it was still very much a learning process. With this game, we remade our rendering engine to give a better impression of water, light and darkness. I'm really proud, and a little surprised, of how much work my team has been able to achieve in just a year and a half of development.

As for the future, it's actually a matter I'm working on right now, in parallel to development of *Siren 2*. On PS3 it's not a question of rendering any more, but of shaders, and that has an incredible impact on shadows. There are still many visual effects I'd like to see realised, and we'll need time to experiment with the PS3 to understand how we can create them.

OUT THERE



MOTHER LODE

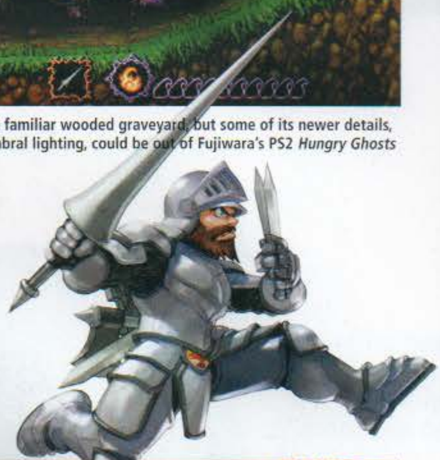
Fans of Nintendo's worldwide cult hit *Earthbound*, for years lying in wait for any new announcement since the N64's cancelled sequel, were given a glimmer of hope this month as series writer Shigesato Itoi revealed in his blog that he'd be taking up temporary residence in Kichijoji, home of *Magical Vacation* developer Brownie Brown's studio. In itself hardly definitive proof of anything in particular, until Brownie Brown's own blog updated with a cryptic Flash file called Project B, a mock RPG battle in the unmistakable style of *Earthbound* (seen here translated by *Earthbound* fansite starmen.net) depicting studio employees battling a tyrannical N-Dude. Whether simply oddly timed coincidence or the first leaks of an official third volume in the series, it's too early to tell.







The first stage takes place in a familiar wooded graveyard, but some of its newer details, like rivers of blood and the umbral lighting, could be out of Fujiwara's PS2 *Hungry Ghosts*







Arthur has a habit of arriving fashionably late to the siege of his kingdom and abduction of his betrothed – first by Satan himself in *Ghosts 'N Goblins* (inset), then by Loki in *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*, in an underworld coup. Hopefully this barmy revisionist mythology will continue in *Extreme G'NG*

INTERVIEW

Schooled in ghosts

Capcom's Professor F returns to bring his classic series to a modern handheld

Tokuro Fujiwara is something of a development legend, responsible for the creation of the *Ghosts 'N Goblins* (or *Makaimura*) series, the production of a huge swathe of Capcom's 16bit console titles (credited as Professor F – "I'm afraid it's a secret," he responds when asked his specialist subject, also declining to have his photograph taken), and post-Capcom titles as diverse as the PS1's *Tomba* and PS2's *Hungry Ghosts*. It was two bombshell announcements in one, then, that not only was a new *G'NG* title in development for PSP, but that Fujiwara had returned to Capcom to oversee it.

How does it feel to be making a new *G'NG* game 20 years on from the original's release?
Above all, I'm feeling fresh. I'm also very happy that 20 years on many fans still love *Makaimura* and are looking forward to a new title as much as I'm enjoying making it.

Many were surprised that the new game is a sidescrolling title, when so many classic platformers have been continued in 3D.
Well, it's not so much a case of me rejecting the concept of a fully 3D platformer, but recognising that it would deliver a very different feeling for the player. If you compare it to a theatrical play, then sidescrolling action gives a viewpoint akin to that of the audience, while a 3D platformer makes you feel as if you're actually on stage.

> **"*Goku Makaimura* is a very exciting game simply because it's easy to pick up and play, but has some deeper tactics"**

Each has their respective advantages and disadvantages, so a shift to 3D would mean that some elements would be lost – also, there are plenty of puzzles that work best in two rather than three dimensions. At the same time, however, I do want to take advantage of what 3D can offer.

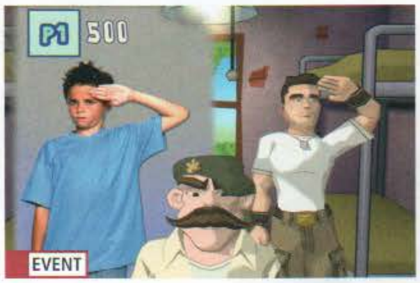
One of *G'NG*'s most memorable moments is Arthur being reduced to his boxer shorts. Is there a story behind that mechanic and effect?
When we were creating the game, it was typical for characters to die and it simply be game over, there and then. It was my belief that one of the interesting elements in an action game is the balance between the happiness that a player feels from their successes and the frustration derived from making mistakes. So I came up with the concept of giving the character armour. When he's in his armour, he's strong, brave and can survive being hit, but when he loses his armour, he becomes naked and weak – the player knows that just one more hit will result in a life lost. So players were still able to make progress despite a couple of mistakes, but that sense of tension remained.



Although the PSP's widescreen seems naturally suited to 2D platformers, Extreme G'NG is one of the first to actually appear on it - though it coincided with several others announced at TGS

The difficulty of *G'NG* games has always been high, and *Super G'NG* on the SNES was the hardest. Now you're making '*Extreme*' *G'NG* – should players be prepared for a challenge?
It'll certainly provide a tough challenge – but we have considered newcomers to the series, and there will be help at hand for them if it's needed.

How do you think today's PSP games will differ from those in the arcades of 1985? Will they still take to *G'NG*?
Goku Makaimura is a very exciting game simply because it's easy to pick up and play, but has some deeper tactics for the player to explore. As the game has been created specifically for the PSP, players can play it anywhere, at any time, even if it's only for a fleeting game. What's widely different to the games of 1985 is the style. Gamers of today have experienced and seen many games, and every time they play something new they want fresh challenges and fresh excitement – this makes the job of developers harder and harder. Today, with improved technology there seems to be a tendency towards greater realism, but I feel that this trend will change in the future.



EVENT



Brighton reaches out

Develop In Brighton pulls its team together before bringing the world to the UK's busiest game development capital



Founded in 2000, the Brighton-based racing division of Climax Studios has grown to accommodate five separate teams, all the while developing a strong portfolio of warmly received titles

Having earned itself the enviable status of a UK development hotbed, Brighton is set to cement and broadcast its reputation next year with the Develop In Brighton expo, running from July 12-13. Backed by the established industry journal, the occasion is sure to receive additional interest now that Susan Marshall of events company CMP Media – behind GDC and GDCE – is on board as conference director. Neither Marshall's appointment nor the general assuredness with which this event is being prepared are particularly surprising, Develop publisher Intent Media's long-standing relationship with CMP having served it and its publications similarly well in the past.

Develop In Brighton is promising a packed timetable of events during which guests will be able to attend an open expo, free seminars and, of course, the conference itself. The event will be hard pushed to satisfy cynics who maintain that it's one industry gathering too many, but the strong backbone of the area's recent development portfolio should imbue it with all the credibility it could need. While Kuju's local studio (formerly Wide Games) has been working with SCEE's London Studio on the third instalment in the *EyeToy: Play* series (above left), the Climax studio in Brighton continues to earn praise for its dedication to racing game projects (above) and technology.

With MMORPG developer RedBedlam, handheld game developer Affinity, specialist service provider Babel Media and games-on-demand pioneer Lime representing just a few of the city's other studios, there's little reason to deny the occasion the support it deserves.

Continue

Hardware surprises
Just how did Nintendo keep it all so secret?

Swimwear soirees
You've never seen a party like IGDA's Tokyo bash...

360's power supply
Doing a fine job of keeping next-gen hardware slim

Quit

360's power supply
You'll want to hide it. You'll need a big old hiding place

Queues in Tokyo
Praise be for the powers of portable gaming hardware

Ill-defined hi-definition
If you have a swanky TV, at least set it up properly



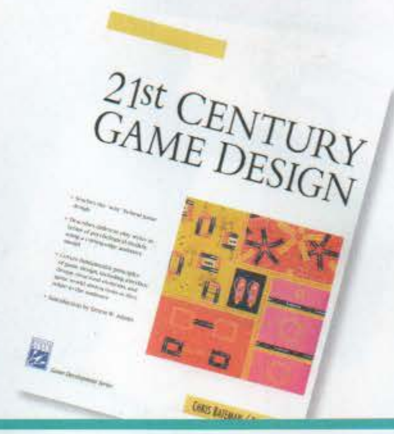
Author: Tricia Sullivan
Publisher: Orbit
ISBN: 1 84149 337 6

DOUBLE VISION

Extraterrestrial battlefields merge with Reagenite America through the medium of late-night TV static

Multilayered scenarios in which characters move between a presumed fantasy and semi-imagined reality are nothing new, but you'd have to look hard to find any as polished yet fractious as Tricia Sullivan's Double Vision. In the parlance of astrophysics, it's positively multidimensional. Back in the early 1980s in a cubicle in midtown US sits Cookie Orbach. If she was conscious, she'd probably be stuffing in pizza and ice cream. Only she isn't conscious. Tuned out facing a blue TV screen, she's clocked on for another shift acting as the airborne eyes to a mismatched assault team fighting their way through an alien landscape full of fear and confusion. Her boss says the soldiers are sent into action from a gravity-torsion generator in New Hampshire, and who's Cookie to argue when daily she witnesses the battles of the Machine Front within the Grid?

Yet interspersed with the mundane routines of her outside life – karate and D&D sessions – the layers slowly become transparent as reality and imagination warp together. Serge and her assault team are lost in the Grid, surrounded by the undead golems. Cookie too finds herself trapped; vomiting if she eats anything other than a specific starfish-shaped cereal. But it's only when she faces up to her screen demons (her physic abilities are triggered by CRTs) and begins playing text-based computer adventure *Quark* that the membrane between the two worlds peels back in a compelling demonstration of Sullivan's intricate storytelling poise.



Authors: Chris Bateman & Richard Boon
Publisher: Charles River Media
ISBN: 1 58450 429 3

21ST CENTURY GAME DESIGN

Forget the process, the new wave of game design is all about understanding your audiences

Logically, it could be seen as a bit of a copout to start a 300-page book about game design with the concept of Zen Game Design; namely that enlightenment can't be expressed in words. But don't worry, the other 299 pages aren't blank. Instead, Bateman and Boon, founders of the International Hobo group of designers, are attempting something a bit different from the design books produced over the past couple of years. Instead of laying down the law, their angle offers a new point of view, starting with the needs of the gamer, rather than the processes of the developers. This, in turn, leads them to create their own breakdown of player types, eschewing the traditional hobbyist/casual delineations. Snappily called Demographic Game Design 1, it's an approach based on traditional models such as the Myers-Briggs' typology and created to maximise a game's appeal to different audiences. Coalescing around four playstyles – Conqueror; Manager; Wanderer and Participant – this provides the basis to drill down into what sort of game experience is likely to appeal to each segment. The analysis is certainly no light read, with academic faves such as Csikszentmihalyi's concept of flow and Caillois' sociology of play categories, but out of the flux come ideas such as the dimensionality of control systems and issues surrounding in-game avatars. And with plenty of examples provided at each step, it provides a surprisingly workmanlike if lateral addition to the designers' perspective.

INCOMING

New games, and updates on games already on the radar

Soul Calibur III

FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



The good news is that the fourth stage of history is as lavish a PS2 title as you could hope for (unless you like owls, in which case the good news is Olcadan, the newcomer pictured above)

Polarium Micro

FORMAT: GBA **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO



Visually simpler than before yet blessed with a more substantial range of modes, the DS block-puzzler has shrunk not only to a single screen, but to a well publicised one-handed control system

Call Of Duty 2

FORMAT: 360, PC **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION



Activision's most promising prospect for 360 (due more to its PC source than ambitious conversion) offers a fiercer conflict than before, Infinity Ward aiming for maximum technical commotion

Prince Of Persia

FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



Having seen the intriguing card battler that's heading to DS, it's somewhat disappointing to find the PSP entertaining Pipeworks' deluxe version of *Warrior Within* rather than an all-new adventure

Prey

FORMAT: 360, PC **PUBLISHER:** 2K GAMES



2K didn't do itself many favours at X05, the underwhelming sight of *Amped 3* making the call for a status report on Human Head's extravagant FPS even louder. How far into 2006 must we wait?

Resident Evil: Deadly Silence

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** CAPCOM



Visual concessions aside, the feature list of this DS adaptation of the first *Resident Evil* is an attractive proposition. Fourplayer wireless support and touchscreen knife battles are the big draws

TimeShift

FORMAT: 360, PC, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** ATARI



A rather colossal shift in time has affected the release date of Saber's ambitious shooter, Atari's desire to ship it primarily as a 360 title knocking all of its versions back to the middle of 2006

Super Princess Peach

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO



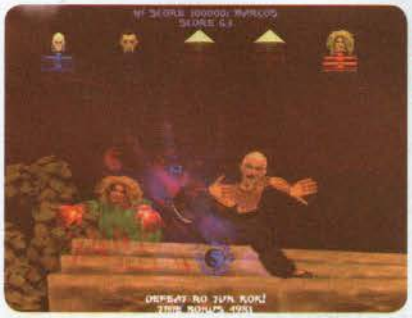
Announced last year, this blindingly colourful alternative to the upcoming *Super Mario Brothers* offers a more recognisable art style that'll surely be embraced by fans of 2001's *Wario Land 4*

The Outsider

FORMAT: 360, PS3 **PUBLISHER:** FRONTIER



David Braben's announcement of his company's first next-gen title packed more revolutionary bluster than even this industry is used to seeing. Better than the last Wallace & Gromit game, then



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Ragdoll Kung Fu

www.ragdollkungfu.com

Between the limp marionette character posing, the wind-up-and-pitch wholly mouse-driven interface and the no-budget cutscenes, *Ragdoll Kung Fu* is the very definition of vision-driven gaming auteurism at its finest.

Like *Yie Ar Kung Fu* for a new generation, *Ragdoll*'s battles require much of the same arrow-guided deliberation, but replace all of the pixel-snap precision with entheogen-drenched fluidity, as your fighter flips slowly skyward, caught in a time-collapsing mushroom-addled haze, and lets loose his flaming fists. It's perfect zen calm just as much as brutal beating, just as it's a technical marvel – in its application, at least – as much as an artistic one, marrying what are essentially crude stick figures with a gorgeously designed permanent-sunset world and managing expert cohesion.

The short Story mode serves as much-needed training for its online battles, and with copious unlockables *Ragdoll* packs a good amount of punch in its budget release, and promises even more customisation further down the road.



SOMETHING ABOUT Japan



My Tokyo Game Show

Famitsu PS2's Koji Aizawa on next-gen graphics and new TVs

As you should know, this month the big news in Japan concerned the Tokyo Game Show. It was quite an event this time – in fact we haven't witnessed such excitement on the TGS showfloor for a long while. There were so many people and so many new announcements made by Japanese game makers. I've tried to pick out a few elements for you I thought were very interesting to see.

The main scoop, and certainly the core element of this year's TGS, was without doubt Nintendo's Revolution. Nintendo has never really attended a TGS before, so its involvement this time was a big deal. The most surprising aspect of Iwata's keynote address concerning the Revolution was the complete absence of a live demo – it was just him holding this new and very revolutionary controller. This controller makes you ask tons of questions, but my first thought was that I was very interested in trying the machine. I'm pretty sure Nintendo will successfully deliver a very enjoyable new game experience. I mean, Nintendo is very good at that, right? But that can't prevent me from asking myself lots of questions. If the Revolution offers a totally new gaming experience, the unique aspects like its controller almost exclude it from having any of the hits developed on the PS3 or 360 – the same game will not be able to be developed on all three consoles; a specific and original development has to be produced for the Revolution.

Interestingly, Nintendo's vision of the future of the videogame is such a powerful and exciting one that people are not bothered they have not seen a single game yet. Many are just interested in trying it out and working on it.

The second big talking point of this TGS was the PlayStation 3, and particularly Konami's *Metal Gear Solid 4* video, which was presented in a huge theatre inside Sony's booth. People were really shocked to see the visuals, with such a level of realism, running in realtime. The video was very 'Kojima style', with lots of humour. After the presentation of *Killzone 2* at E3 in the summer, people were very sceptical about the truth behind the video. Was it really in realtime? It even created arguments between 360 and PS3 fans. But, thanks to *MGS4*, we now know that the PS3 is indeed capable of such incredible visuals in realtime. This was a very important point to me, especially after the way things had turned out at E3.

Xbox 360 tried to make the show its own. Microsoft certainly had the biggest booth at the

Interestingly, Nintendo's vision of the future of the videogame is such a powerful and exciting one that people are not bothered they have not seen a single game yet. Many are just interested in trying it out and working on it



Namco's *Frame City Killer* is a prime example of the new trend of Japanese devcos attempting to draw on western game traditions to boost global sales



Ninty-Nine Nights was one of the games expected to electrify the 360's reputation at TGS, but many commentators felt it seemed sterile





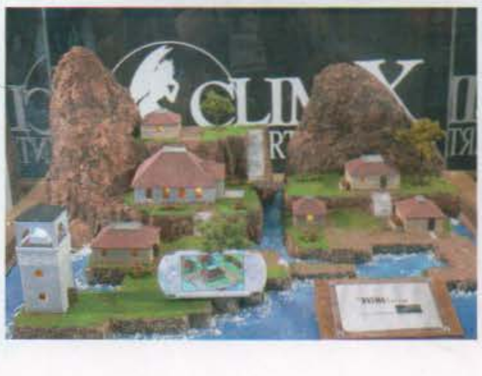
The freshest 360 game on show was *Every Party*, from current darling Game Republic, but Microsoft put little impetus behind it, tucking it away among more standard games

show, and it worked hard to promote its console to the Japanese. But at only two months before the official launch, I was really expecting the company to deliver its best to appeal to the Japanese audience. So I was expecting big titles like *DOA4*, *Ridge Racer 6* or *Gundam* to take lots of space on the booth. But this was not the case.

As everybody is promoting high-resolution graphics with the next generation, many were equipped with state-of-the-art displays. Microsoft was the only manufacturer with actual units of its new console, so it had to deliver on the visual quality it had promised – and it did. TGS was indeed a place where you could appreciate how graphics have evolved from the standard quality we are enjoying right now to the next step, which is very shocking. Microsoft had the kind of LCD displays which are still very expensive but gave a good insight about what to expect in your home (well, at least if you are equipped accordingly). Other companies went beyond that, such as Sega, which had a huge display, a piece of hardware which costs several tens of millions of yen just to lease. In truth, every company was trying very hard to show how much games will change with the next generation of consoles, at least visually. For me, I haven't had much interest in Japan's digital TV broadcast so far, even though I know it is going to be our standard here in a few years, but the PS3 and 360 have actually convinced me to invest in a new TV.



Microsoft's lavish 360 booth was busy at TGS, but the lack of games targeting Japanese tastes meant that it lacked excitement. Meanwhile, an award for presentation of the show went to this lavish *Landstalker* diorama (below)





Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Rumble Roses XX



Because it'll add some appreciated neon to the dubious artwork and stainless steel of 360's early line-up. And because of the shamelessly exploitative catfighting, of course.
360, KONAMI

New Inis Game



So far we may only have been shown a tech demo of the engine, but news that *Ouendan* developer Inis is at work on Xbox 360 is enough to set the mind popping.
360, TBA

Sonic The Hedgehog



For all of the new and rather bewildering incarnations Sega has planned for Sonic, it's still fitting – and just fun – to look forward to next-gen games that run this fast.
360, SEGA

Reality sucks

Why things should never be the same again



Ikaruga is a fine example of how abstract games – especially shmups – can explore patterns of interaction and systems of cause and effect that aren't based on anything recognisably real

Videogaming is bad at words. It's bad at scripts, it's bad at genre names, it's bad at jargon, and it's bad at definitions. It's got a very nasty habit of taking big words, like 'physics', and applying them in pared-down, selective ways, without ever really explaining what they mean.

Worst abused is 'reality'. To be classified as realistic, a game doesn't have to exhibit any knowledge of, let alone respect for, how people act, how objects work, how day follows night, how physics (or even 'physics') governs our world. Instead, it just needs to look as close as possible to what a photo of those things would look like if they occupied real space. And that's enough, usually, for it to pass muster as 'realistic'.

But while gaming may be a hundred years off representing a reasonable facsimile of the full functions of reality, rather than just the appearance of it, the moment games start looking real is when they start limiting their interactions to things we recognise. In the wake of the quest for this visual realism comes a swathe of tasks, procedures and dynamics that we do recognise from life: gameplay mechanics which mimic real-world economic or legal systems, for example. Systems of cause and effect and checks and balance which have the great virtue of not needing to be explained to the player because they deal with them every day. But isn't one of the wonders of games that they can model things that don't exist?

Every Extend, the freeware PC shmup now coming to PSP courtesy of Mizuguchi (see p50), is a case in point. Its core dynamic is that your ship can't shoot, only self destruct. But take out enough enemies in your heroic suicide and you'll score enough points to gain an extra life and return to the fray to kill yourself afresh. It's reincarnation reincarnated as a system of perpetual motion, something which has no model or corollory in the real world. And that newness adds real fascination and satisfaction to what's otherwise a fairly simple videogame. And it's that innovation which is at the heart of why it's so important to champion games which are visually abstract. It's not wireframe, retro-hugging self indulgence – it helps to ensure that games aren't just about driving cars, fighting wars and paying taxes.

FORMAT: **GC, PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (MONTREAL)**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **Q4**

Prince Of Persia: The Two Thrones

The Sands Of Time swirl into a mist of confusion for Ubisoft's ailing warrior



Wrapped around his arm as he falls foul of the Sands, this barbed chain becomes a permanent addition to the Prince's anatomy and arsenal. Time will tell if this nod to *Castlevania* adds anything worthwhile to the formula







Ubisoft seems to have an obsession with swinging secondary characters right now, but while Kong offers something entirely beyond the capability of his human co-stars, the Dark Prince is largely a modified mirror of his more amiable self

Terms like innovation and character felt like understatements in *Sands Of Time*, but in *Warrior Within* they became swearwords – an arrogant Prince and a hard rock soundtrack corrupting rather than enhancing Jordan Mechner's adventure. But of the two games, the maligned sequel would turn the tidiest profit, thus providing a turn of events that poetically split the series' identity. It now seems preoccupied by its own strengths and weaknesses, and by dedicating a game to its fractured personality it risks undermining it still further. Indeed, it serves mostly to prove that insiration needs to be created afresh rather than recaptured through imitation. From what we've seen of it so far, this third game's retreat to the style of *Sands* is closer to troubled homage than glorious return.





The immediate fear when encountering *Thrones*' new 'speed kills' is that the series' focus has shifted from sophisticated brain-teasing to juvenile battery. At best, the end result will lie somewhere in between

Neither Ubisoft Montreal nor game producer **Ben Mattes** particularly want to suggest that this is anything other than a natural convergence of the previous titles into a single dramatic opus, and he's confident when asked if that goal seems a little contrived. "There might have been a little bit of worry at the very beginning," he says, "but only in that there's always such concern when you're making a new game. As the development process has continued, though, we've become increasingly confident that the innovations we've added are very successful in creating a new level of gameplay that will provide not only a great trilogy, but a great standalone game." The facts regarding the significance of the second game, however, are difficult to massage.

"Given that it's the third game in the trilogy," reveals Mattes, "we had very lofty goals this time – we want as many people as possible to play through the game to the end, and to have all their questions answered as to the various apparent holes in the story thus far. We've really done a lot of preproduction to research market studies and critical reports of both *Sands Of Time* and *Warrior Within* – to find out what really went well in those games. A non-exclusive list of the things we drew influence from in *Sands Of Time* would be the artistic direction, the lighter tones, the Persian-inspired universe, the strong focus on an enthralling story, the emotional connection between players and characters and the humour that gave the game its class. From *Warrior Within*, meanwhile, it would be the faster paced action, and some of the darker tone."

Exclusive list or otherwise, the balance is certainly askew there by quite a margin. There's nothing specifically wrong with hushing the influence of the second game



The invading army generals, corrupted both physically and mentally to varying degrees by the Sands Of Time, provide a hierarchy of boss battles dominated by QTE button presses and scripted strategy. At least their sense of scale is sound





Whatever damage is inflicted by crass additions such as the chariot racing pictured above, at least *Two Thrones* has its artistic pretensions to fall back on. The upper and lower cities suitably differ in style as they pass from decadence into poverty, and the Prince's strategic advantage is lost

this time round – hell, there's plenty right in it – but *Thrones*' outlook exhibits an awful lot of reverse momentum for a game to be released on the eve of a new generation.

Where it expands upon (we're reluctant to say improves) the *Persia* playing style is in a variety of 'innovations' that are, to a large degree, entirely familiar. 'Speed kills' are now the focus of combat, and are essentially a composite of stealth approaches and *God Of War*-inspired QTE combos. Though they offer an exciting flourish when executed on top of a dash or a wall-run, there's little to suggest that these orchestrated button presses yield anything as artfully brutal as Jaffe's game. Despite the loss of inventive spirit, we'll readily accept the prospect of a *Prince Of Persia* that celebrates its own strengths and indulges in its very decent story, but it's harder to be confident when it calls on other series for creative support. If the flame of ingenuity is dampened somewhat in this regard, however, there's a further fear that its new chariot racing sections may snuff it out completely.

Thrones' other major shift – essentially a second playable character – offers a little more promise. The team is quite happy to reveal that, at an early juncture, the Empress Kaileena is killed while the Prince can only stand and watch. As a result, the Sands Of Time pour from her fallen body and pounce upon both him and her assailants – the officers of the invading human army. The Prince is momentarily overwhelmed, a chain wrapped around his arm becoming seared into his flesh, and the weaker traits that defined him during *Warrior Within* becoming embodied by a reckless, sadistic alter ego known simply as the Dark Prince. "In moments of particular strife and turmoil when the Prince drops his guard," reveals Mattes, "the opportunity arises for the sands to take control, initiating his transformation."

"In moments of particular strife and turmoil when the Prince drops his guard, the opportunity arises for the sands to take control, initiating his transformation"

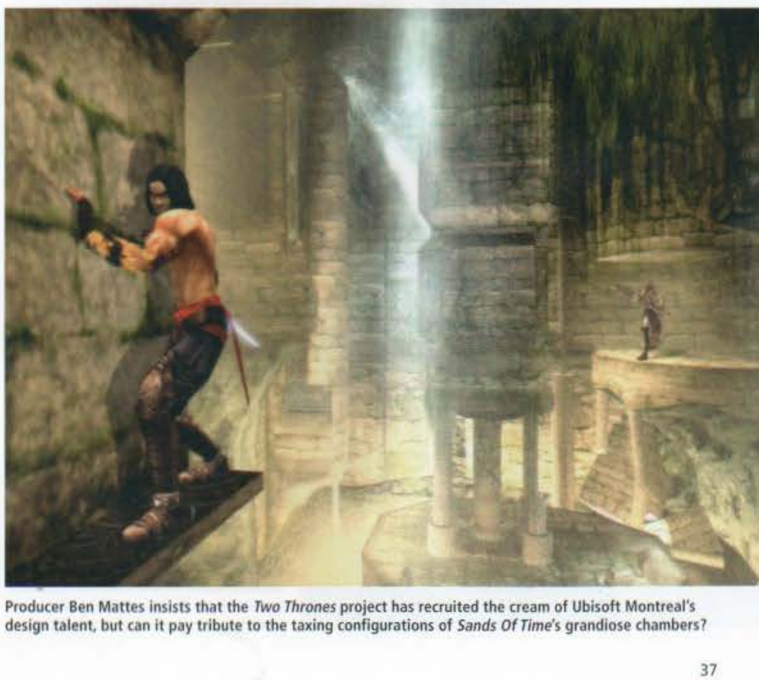
The result is a character that substitutes dagger thrusts and leaps with chain attacks and swings. Mattes highlights a connection between this mode of control and levels that, literally speaking, reach new heights in their setup of "high-risk, high-reward dramatic combos." The Dark Prince also, when relegated to the back of the Prince's mind, serves as a non-invasive tutorial, suggesting strategies during boss encounters as well as triggering exchanges of dialogue. It may sound like EA-style prompting, but it could also sprinkle some spice in the event of the action proving pedestrian.

There's every chance that *Two Thrones* will emerge as an enjoyable game that tells an engrossing tale, but it's clearly lost the confident creativity which was *Sands*' greatest strength. The two games stand as oddly contradictory testaments to the power of style and atmosphere in games: one elevated by the freshness of its vision, the other undermined by its clumsy copycatting. Third time around, even that level of invention has been abandoned, and it's unclear whether that decision will play to the series' strengths or remove its creative heart.



Warrior beyond

Storywise, *Thrones* is at least consistent with the series' escalation of thematic event and game content. Set days after the end of *Warrior Within*, it opens as the Prince and Kaileena – the Empress Of Time from that game – are returning to the Prince's home city of Babylon. Expecting a royal welcome from his father, they instead discover a city under siege from an army they've never seen before. A warship attacks and, following a customary loss of consciousness, the Prince awakens to find himself washed ashore as she is whisked away into the city's depths. What follows is a satisfyingly operatic tale of tragedy, revenge and, of course, grotesque mutation.



Producer Ben Mattes insists that the *Two Thrones* project has recruited the cream of Ubisoft Montreal's design talent, but can it pay tribute to the taxing configurations of *Sands Of Time*'s grandiose chambers?





FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **PANDEMIC**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MARCH 2006**

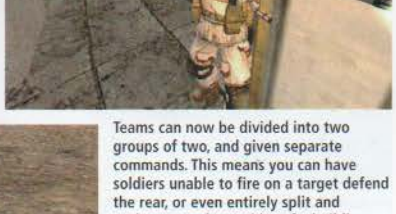
Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers

What happens when you make a modern war sim during a modern war? You get all emotional about it



***Ten Hammers* allows soldiers to enter buildings in order to gain the tactical advantage of an elevated position. This will hopefully give the city a more genuine atmosphere, rather than the decorate maze of the original**





Teams can now be divided into two groups of two, and given separate commands. This means you can have soldiers unable to fire on a target defend the rear, or even entirely split and perhaps guard two sides of a building

It looked like it was going to be something of a fad for a while there – developing games for the army. The free-to-download *America's Army* took things directly to the point of ridiculousness, entirely bypassing the more traditional route through sublime. *Full Spectrum Warrior* went in a different direction, designed not to recruit the football-addled minds of America's youth but to entertain the army itself. According to developer Pandemic, most soldiers have an Xbox in their quarters, and the government-funded plan was to create something that would entertain during soldiers' spare time while reinforcing key tactical values. It was financial genius to simultaneously develop a retail version. It was political genius to use this endorsement to defy publisher desires, and make a game quite unlike anything else around.

The original *Full Spectrum Warrior* only finally let itself down by failing to exploit its potential. Dual-squad-based strategy-action war simulation is not a particularly saturated genre to date, so perhaps being the first of its kind excused a lot of the shortcomings, but ultimately its roots in an official training sim were too much to overcome. So there are reasons to approach its more independent sequel, *Ten Hammers*, with a rather more optimistic heart.

Named after a fictional bridge in a fictional Middle Eastern setting, the title comes from the Americanised bastardisation of its correct title, Tien Hamir. Twelve missions are divided up into four distinct chapters, each providing a different perspective on the same main story – the capturing of this bridge. This acts as a useful storytelling device, meaning that in one chapter you might see a falling tower in the background, and in the next be charged with the previously witnessed demolition. But it also serves to make possible perhaps the most significant development since the original – your characters can now die.

While the team themselves identify no correlation with the changing fortunes of th coalition forces in Iraq and the more emotionally vulnerable tone of their sequel, it's hard not to imagine that at least some subconscious influence is at work. No longe are your squads merely inconvenienced by gaping bullet holes through their major organs, heroically surviving to see the credit Now they're dead, and never coming back. And this doesn't come with a sacrifice of personality – the number of lines of dialogu has quadrupled, with fast-approaching 80 unique replacement soldiers, individually designed and voiced. It's the multiple perspectives that allow for this 'collateral damage', soldiers who perish are simply not needed later on, without breaking the story flow. They want you to care when a man goes down, enough to want to prevent it. But with its eyes set on authenticity, Pandemic is trying to replace the pantomim

Built on the same engine (tweaked to increase both the volume and detail of units and relying on the previous four years of interaction with the army, the changes mad to the format are said to have been almost exclusively based on user feedback. And for









The game's single city has been deliberately designed to not look recognisable as any particular territory, in order to maintain the fictional setting. This, it is hoped, will allow the action to be authentic without appearing to trivialise any current conflicts



Soldiers can't spend any time in the open, or they'll be mown down. Exposure such as this can only be risked if another unit is imposing suppressing fire upon the enemy, and then only very temporarily. No FPS action here



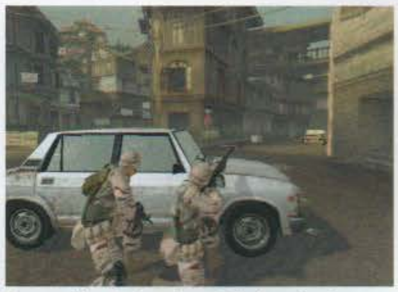
once this platitude appears to be true. Probably the most controversial element of the original was the inability to actually shoot for yourself. Units could be commanded to fire in a particular direction, but the targeted action was conducted by the AI. Now, the introduction of a 'precision fire' mode will allow you to take control of any individual soldier whenever you wish, firing his particular specialist weapon from a firstperson perspective. However, doing this exposes your soldier entirely, and is reasonably likely to get him killed. It's an interesting balance, which allows for precision play at appropriate moments, but does not let the player subvert the nature of the game.

The more major changes come as a result of developing a multiplayer incarnation, to be supported on all platforms. *FSW* played out as a turn-based strategy, enemies restricted in their movement by your position. Giving a human control over these enemies obviously removes such protective measures, meaning that a different dynamic had to be realised. The game has sped up, switching from a turn-based atmosphere to realtime. In turn, this has inspired Pandemic to present a similar game to the singleplayer. Awkward controls are being tidied up, commands doubled in number but more easily accessed, and the positioning cursor is already significantly improved, allowing orders to be given smoothly and on the fly. Supporting this is the obvious-once-you've-thought-of-it ability to give, say, the Bravo team orders from the Alpha team's perspective. With the additional ability to call in support such as Bradleys and helicopters in the midst of the action, the game can reach a frenetic level while maintaining a tactics-based focus.

The 'precision fire' mode will allow you to take control of any individual soldier whenever you wish, firing his particular specialist weapon from a firstperson perspective

The multiplayer mode itself introduces some new ideas. Taking inspiration from the *Splinter Cell* series, you'll play a very different game depending upon whether you're controlling the Coalition forces or the ambiguously foreign insurgents. When playing as the enemy, it ceases to be a squad-based game, instead controlling one soldier at a time, with an additional number of unique abilities such as sniping. Each map will offer opponents a conflicting mission to complete, adding more interest than merely asking them to play hide-and-seek among the urban setting.

The code is currently pre-alpha, still half a year from completion, which makes it hard to assess if *Ten Hammers* will have addressed enough to overcome the repetition which undermined the original. But while moving away from the purity which gave the original much of its character, there's no doubt Pandemic has substantially widened the game's potential.



Scenery will again be used tactically, the safety it provides dependent upon its structure. *Ten Hammers'* cars are only any use as cover so long as their windows survive, before becoming a risk to cower behind



Safety first

Another addition to the interface is the Combat Effectiveness gauge. Replacing the rather confusing symbols that previously appeared above enemy heads, the focus of skill is shifted to the soldiers under your command. Ideally this gauge is kept empty, meaning that you're in a secure position, protected against enemy fire and able to employ your weapons effectively. But as you become more vulnerable, or less able to respond, the bar fills to demonstrate the danger you're in and preventing you from carrying out certain tasks. It endeavours to encourage you to play tactically, seeking safety over assault, like a good soldier should.



Clearly packed to breaking point with sci-fi cliché, chiselled jaws and cocksure charisma, *Gears* doesn't come across as a game that's stopped once to contemplate a shake-up of its thematic base, but neither does it care



Gears Of War

As the demo pods of X05 fired one blank after another, it fell to the creator of Unreal to bring along a redeemer

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **EPIC GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2006**

There's something about Epic that makes a game like *Gears Of War* particularly difficult to prejudge – something in the thousand-yard stare the company has developed in the years spent dealing arms to gaming's most hyperactive consumers. *Unreal 2* did little to shake the image of a company locked in a multiplayer mindset, and yet the creativity with which the *Tournament* games continue to engage players in casual thermonuclear conversation remains dazzling. The skills are certainly there to make a true next-gen blockbuster, but you have to question whether Epic's design teams can think above the ringing in their ears.

Limited to a single chunk of preparatory drama and subsequent noise, what we see of *Gears* at X05 nonetheless provides much of the answer we've been hoping for, and a glimpse of something that pessimism, admittedly, made us reluctant to expect.

Having fallen back to a thirdperson vantage point similar in its widescreen arrangement of elements to that of *Resident Evil 4*, this stubbornly thunderous rollercoaster is unexpectedly inspired and, in Epic's inimitable way, ghoulishly artistic. Assuming Unreal Engine 3 to be the backbone of 360's second generation, it makes sense for the last game of its first (a timetable suggested by lead designer Cliff Bleszinski's indication that it may only just squeak through the system's 'year-long' launch window) to provide a resplendent billboard for the technology.

Pounded by rain that isn't a far cry from Sin City's fierce flecks of white, the game's environment is a tenfold elaboration of Epic's traditionally fragged vision of the future. Exercising what we'll assume to be a considerable proportion of 360's resources, it's drenched itself in layers of water that visibly course down the bark of trees, splash upon the banks of nearby lakes and weigh heavily on the armour of characters Marcus and Dom. Fleeting previews of the Locust Wretches – the foot soldiers of the game's subterranean oppressors – are grasped as lightning breaks the veil of night, and within moments the ruined face of the game's next environment, an Emulsion processing facility, looms into view.

The variety of textures woven into its near-monochromatic interiors makes for a remarkable composition – a glimpse, perhaps, of the point at which the bump and normal maps of current-gen games will finally segue into something convincingly real. But with Bleszinski negotiating each point of cover and springing each trap, the freedom of movement offered by this 'Space Mountain with guns' opener is hard to determine. As he draws both the camera and our attention to each of the level's scripted spectacles, we wonder if *Gears* will end up joining the ranks of those showcase games in which the action frequently lulls into a thinly veiled spectator mode, the player becoming more and more an exhibitionist than an active participant. Based on all that we've seen so far, that's the game's likeliest worst-case scenario, but for the ride alone, we'd still take a front-row seat.





One memorable moment from the X05 build is known as the 'panic cam' – an off-kilter zoom mode that's adopted whenever the player makes a bounding run. This, we're told, is one of the game's many cutscene-quality effects

"When we started building the Emulsion factory," remarks Bleszinski, "I was hoping that it would look a lot like an old textile mill instead of random robot puke – I wanted to see more brick, more wood, and more day-to-day materials"







Shotgun rider

Bleszinski wants *Gears Of War*'s spotlight to focus no less intently on its potential second player than it does its first. A mine-cart chase (for lack of a better term) through its refinery level reveals how well the game splits its coop players' paths while ensuring that they remain significant features in each other's game. Quite how the player controlling Dom, however, is expected to survive the shocking cliffhanger at the demo's end is something for a more substantial playtest (and, no doubt, either a hailstorm of bullets or a lucky cutscene) to explain.





Dead Rising

Inafune's supermarket creeps want you to shop 'til they drop, but will they give you space to figure out how?

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **2006**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151**

One technophobic concern that X05 did little to placate was that of developers becoming overwhelmed by the sheer potential of tomorrow's hardware. Gamers don't want to endure an initial wave of titles, for example, that fill their screens with unprecedented waves of enemies that nonetheless lack the smarts and situation necessary for a rewarding contest. **Keiji Inafune** is sure to be accused of just such a crime following his latest game's appearances in both Tokyo and Amsterdam. But alongside the early nature of its demonstrated code, it's important to consider that *Dead Rising* is a game that's all about being overwhelmed.





Earlier concerns regarding the representation of impact in *Dead Rising* have been partially alleviated by the sheer bedlam caused by each swing of its many weapons. The attack animations, however, could still do with some added variety

Capcom's 360 flagship is determined to single out the gaping avenues of escape and elusion that commonly undermine survival horrors, before congealing them to near closure with bustling parties of the undead. Inafune describes it as both a 'true survival' and 'real zombie' game, and neither of these definitions is surprising when you consider that the first should really be a prerequisite of the second anyway, and that *Rising* is essentially Dawn Of The Dead but with a suite of Japanese videogame conventions scattered throughout.

"Only now are true interpretations of the zombie genre possible," claims Inafune. "This, like *Onimusha*, is a game about experimenting and toying with different types of action, but it's also recognition that traditional action formulae have only so much life left in them." The build available for play at X05 (something described by its creator as a 'capability demo') certainly suggests a zombie game like no other, but much of that can be attributed to the fact that, in terms of balance, it's completely





"Loading times will be shorter in the final game," Inafune states, "but there'll be so much interactivity that some is inevitable. The memory requirements will be enormous"

broken. Doling out simple objectives such as reaching and then escorting potentially informative civilians, the game makes unhindered negotiation of its sharply defined zombie hordes nigh impossible, regardless of the chosen strategy.

When we say strategy, of course we mean weapon. The close region of the game's shopping mall available in this build is truly wall-to-wall with cadaverous visitors. If there's a fruitful tactic to be found in getting from one end to the other, it's the acquisition of something sharp, hard, explosive or motorised (all four, ideally) with which to batter your way through the lunging bodies. Every action in the demo is mapped to a single button press, including the frantic mashing required to shake off a hungry assailant – something you grow quickly used to, and then quite tired of.

Dead Rising is actually so unbalanced right now that it's impossible to imagine it being representative of either the final or intended product. But while we've no doubt that its action will be overhauled before release, the loading screens that pop up whenever a threshold is crossed (entering a shop, for example) are worrying inclusions. Could it really be that this grand attempt at furthering the zombie genre ends up suffering at the hands of ghosts from its past?



Chain store massacre

As well as providing a technical and logistical nightmare for its creators, *Rising* promises a wet dream for those enamoured with the idea of battering everyone they see with anything that's available. Inafune wants practically every object on every shelf to be a potential weapon, and the selection that's presently scattered across the mall's floor is a generous teaser. The parasol is our personal highlight, and makes for a great battering ram when plucked from a patio table. "I want weapons that are easy to use," says Inafune, "but difficult to use effectively." That's our feeble cash-register bludgeoning technique explained, then.





It's one thing getting your head around using your robot team to negotiate platforms and barrier, but combat add a new, challenging level of sophistication to the game

Karakuri

Where do you go once you've done ninjas, ghosts, monsters and wrestlers? Ah, of course. Robots

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **TECMO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC (JAPAN), TBA (UK)**



There's always an inherent grace and visual satisfaction in repeated patterns of motion, and *Karakuri* picks up on that phenomenon just as surely as choreographers and synchronised swimmers do. Your tiny troupe snaps between different formations very niftily, and guarantees that the game has a distinct and likeable visual style

Of late, Tecmo has earned itself a bit of a reputation for excess. As the costumes in *Dead Or Alive* get steadily skimpier, the enemies faced by Ryu Hayabusa get relentlessly tougher and news spreads of the company's decision to pick up a lucrative manga licence to create the PC MMO *Bastard!! Online*, it seems more and more like a studio dedicated to turning things up to 11. But that's to forget its gentler heritage – the subtle horror of *Project Zero* and the pastoral charm of *Monster Rancher*. And its new PSP action puzzler, *Karakuri*, is very much more in line with that tradition, which is no coincidence, as it's designed by Keisuke Kikuchi, the man behind the *Project Zero* series.

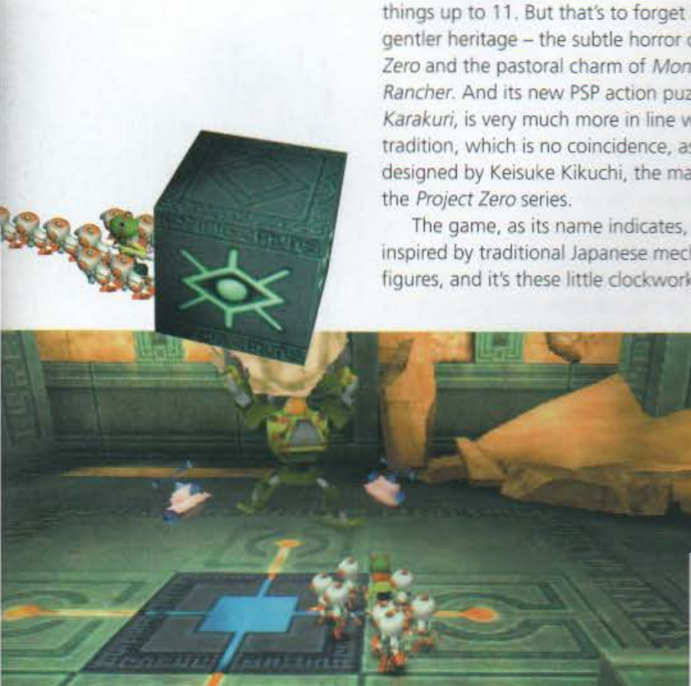




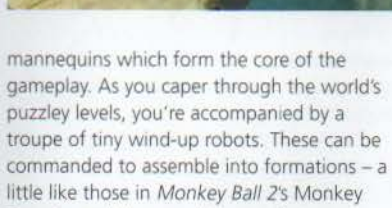
The game, as its name indicates, is inspired by traditional Japanese mechanical figures, and it's these little clockwork mannequins which form the core of the gameplay. As you caper through the world's puzzley levels, you're accompanied by a troupe of tiny wind-up robots. These can be commanded to assemble into formations – a little like those in *Monkey Ball 2*'s Monkey Target – and then used to negotiate your environment or defeat enemies. Order them into a column and it can be used to form a bridge across a gap, a ladder which can be climbed or a whip to defeat distant enemies. Call for a circle and they'll form a defensive ring around you, but you'll need to watch that you don't lose any of your band as you move around the level.

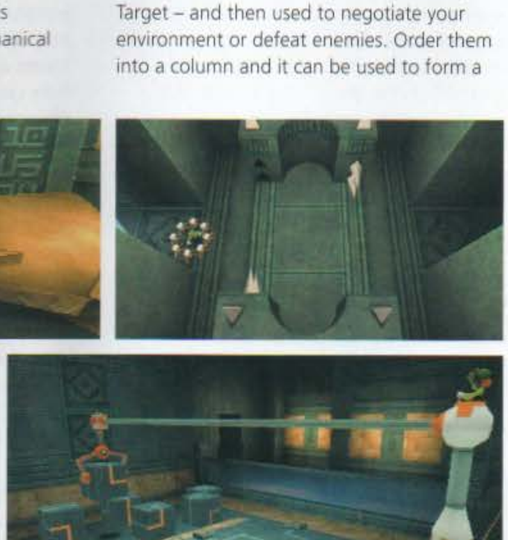
First impressions are that this will be a dynamic and inventive title – exactly the kind of thing that the PSP badly needs – but there's also the concern that it's a little over-complicated. Learning the different moves, different formations and different combos produced by sequencing together those different moves and formations may prove frustrating rather than entertaining. There's no question, however, that the more elaborate results – like the Otakara move, which orders your bots to form into one giant bot armed with a katana and sees you riding astride it – are worth the effort.

There's no UK release confirmed as yet, but the announcement of a US name change to *Tokobot* is an encouraging indication that it's been deemed suitable for a western audience. And with good reason – if the simple exuberance of towing your gang of karakuri around the screen translates to a more elaborate and challenging action game, then this could prove a title with almost limitless appeal.



One of the game's great satisfactions is that the many-small-make-one-big nature of the main character means you can tackle vast enemies and even vaster environments successfully





FORMAT: **DS, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **MAXIS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**

The Sims 2

Their world gets smaller by the day, but will downsized ambitions follow for The Sims?



Not the most attractive sight when conveyed via still images, the DS version looks considerably better in motion. It also helps that the game's abundant character survives in spite of such mandatory visual concessions



Quirkiness is a facet of *The Sims* that has increasingly dominated the experience, especially now that the series has moved to home consoles and handhelds. Alien abductions are a case in point, punishing DS players for attempts to 'cheat' the realtime clock that governs its world







It may offer a condensed version of the game fans are used to, but *Sims 2 DS* is made fresh by its enormously efficient control system. Whether creating a character or zipping through in-game dialogues, the touchscreen comes into its own

You could combine the tactile controls of the DS and the technical punch of the PSP and still be left with a machine ill-equipped to play host to The Sims. They may not think particularly big with their knee-jerk reactions and prescribed ambitions, but these little computer people nonetheless think a lot, and in unison. Moreover, for each of their thoughts there's always some accompanying action or other, and like the series itself it's seldom inexpressive. Making this game mobile continues to demand salient changes to both design and implementation, yet Maxis insists the *Sims 2* moniker has been retained because the core experience is unaltered.

But what is the *Sims* experience? Particularly, how much gameworld real estate can you trim, and how many systems can you re-engineer, before that fundamental character is either transformed or lost? On both handhelds, this should be an interesting question to address, not least because the games concerned are subject to a second generation of changes, derived as they are from home versions with a console-friendly makeover already applied. The Sim sandbox has become somewhat shallower here, but has effectively lengthened to accommodate a more dominant storyline and stepping-stone goals to guide your Sim, ideally, to the heights of their ambitions.

On DS, much of that career path will involve the running of a hotel in Strangetown – the game's downsized but nonetheless distracting world. Described from the outset as a more dedicated exploration of Nintendo's hardware than last year's dismal *The Urbz*, it's as much a hybrid of Tamagotchi and adventure game as it is a more intimate version of *Sim Tower*. Tasks such as keeping obnoxious guests happy and performing typical Sim activities are mixed with housekeeping chores that, as a much-needed sweetener, yield unlockable items. Elsewhere, the hotel's convenient art gallery and sound system offer well-endowed paint and song-writing minigames, the products of which have sensibly been made sharable via wireless link.

Comparatively, the PSP game is a more straightforward attempt at honouring the home console versions, but is also heavier on adventure and on the more momentary modes of distraction. Its five story-driven levels, based on a 'secrets of Strangetown' premise, traverse a wider and more recognisable world than the DS, but have been unable to employ the kind of low-level structural assembly/reassembly systems that grace the Xbox, GameCube and PS2. A month and a half behind the DS in development terms, its integrity is arguably in need of some work. At present, the game's symbol-matching conversation challenges, modest character generation mode, mindless minigames and clunky controls place it midway between home and handheld design traditions, and while that may befit the PSP's current frame of mind, it doesn't suggest a game that's particularly fit to be played. Not for the moment, at least.





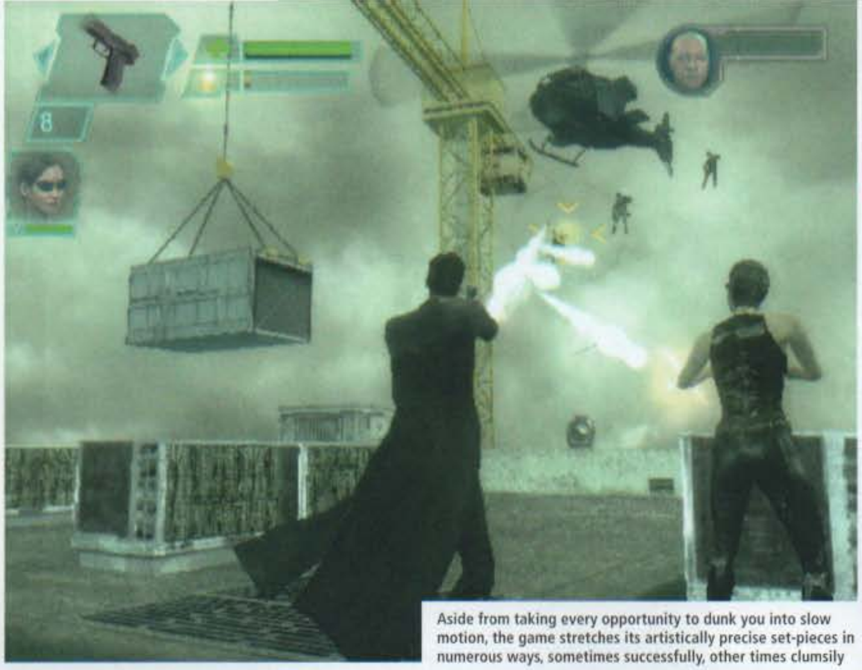




Again, the PSP is left to occupy an awkward limbo between the superior horsepower of home consoles and the thought-provoking limitations of traditional handhelds. As you can see, its visuals are adequate and yet they remain strangely unappealing. The widescreen ratio doesn't feel particularly suitable, either

We've had some ambitious figures quoted to us regarding *Neo's* available moves, none of which reflect the game's actual total. Still, the selection offered is a generous enough batch





Aside from taking every opportunity to dunk you into slow motion, the game stretches its artistically precise set-pieces in numerous ways, sometimes successfully, other times clumsily



Just one mission deviates from the thirdperson norm, that being the on-rails helicopter shoot 'em up from the first film. It's refreshingly short, and almost everything beyond the skeleton of the building itself is destructible





The movie tie-in isn't a genre commonly associated with abundance, but *Neo* takes no shortcuts in covering every Matrix base (along with the many new ones it's created for itself). City-spanning levels, in particular, incorporate numerous levels, each with a style and story of its own

The Matrix: Path Of Neo

Shiny's grand recompilation nears completion, but does enough time remain to polish its code?

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **SHINY ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 11**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151, E152**

If *Path Of Neo* retains the jumble of quality and ideas present in its preview build, it'll be the perfect complement to its scattergun source. From one second to the next, no single tier of quality seems to prevail in a game that nonetheless explores both ends of the spectrum. When it isn't overstretching its tutorial and stifling its action, for example, its story – essentially a Wachowski-penned remix of the saga in all its forms – offers some sublime twists and turns. Meticulously creating the green-graded urban sprawl of the Brothers' electric empire, its visuals also serve up some truly poker-faced characters that glide awkwardly from one motion-captured action to the next. As for the currently considerable framerate issues – we'll just have to see what a month or so of spit and polish can do with those.

More than test our faith in the developer's optimisation skills and the virtues of final as opposed to preview code, *Neo* reminds us just how big a project it represents. This is an attempt to translate three movies' worth of mind-bending action into what, by extension, could be the most multi-faceted fighting system ever made. Somehow its floor-to-ceiling fist and fire fights must work to, build on and bridge over 40 very different set-pieces, all the while fulfilling Shiny's desire to let not one flick of the character's celluloid wrist slip through the game's fingers.

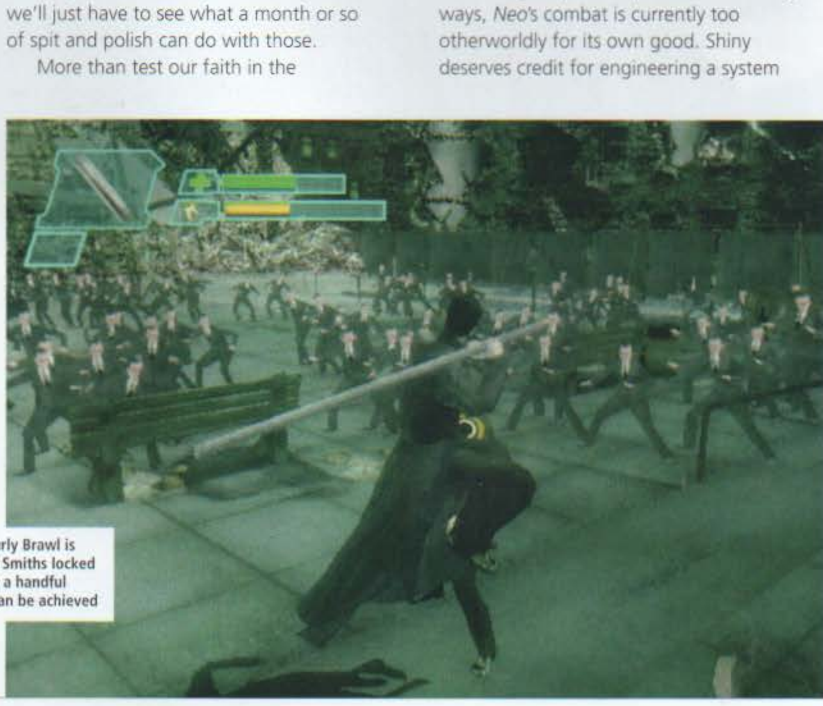
Ironically, though, for such action to be figuratively unbelievable it has to first establish a base of believability, just as gravity-defying spectacle requires a solid sense of gravity to be spectacular. In many ways, *Neo's* combat is currently too otherworldly for its own good. Shiny deserves credit for engineering a system that remains (or, indeed, eventually becomes) intuitive even when spread across every face and shoulder button of a DualShock pad, but something needs to be done about the game's comparative representation of weight and impact. Enforcing slow motion upon already lengthy move animations, it spends so long in one form of bullet-time or other that its action sometimes feels less over-the-top than underwater.

But the pledge has always been that extended development time would ensure a complete and polished product, and *Neo* achieves more than enough to warrant optimism. Visually, its action sequences are uncannily accurate and serve up, almost without fail, the ability to perform the moves made famous by their respective scenes. Perform a Focus Block on the Metacortex rooftop, for instance, and Neo will arch backwards to avoid incoming fire as the free camera adopts the bullet-time angle of your choice. Do the same a few missions later and he'll instead raise his hand to stop oncoming bullets mid-flight, charging them up and propelling them back seconds later. Practically every Matrix moment is tucked somewhere up this game's sleeve. It mightn't be as fluidic or, indeed, as solid a fighting experience as it could be, but *Path Of Neo* is still a suitably epic and heart-warmingly apologetic one.



Upgrades

For the Wachowskis, every iteration of The Matrix is a chance to augment it, even when revisiting old ground. Some might suggest that to be the kind of creative extravagance that sank Shiny's first adaptation, but the effect it's had on *Path Of Neo* exonerates it entirely. *Neo* offers a much wider and deeper Matrix canon than has previously been entered, boasting new material that's written and illustrated with all the pretentious theology, deviant eroticism and wild invention you could expect. Importantly, it all integrates with and benefits the overall design, patching the holes that would otherwise exist between levels and giving greater scope to previously basic scenes.



It's coming together, but the Burly Brawl is still incomplete, its full army of Smiths locked in a perpetual strafe while only a handful attack. We'll soon see if more can be achieved





Hopefully, progress has been made in fleshing out *Getting Up*'s limited combat system. The game likes to play up its provision of nothing beyond the weapons of the street and the arist, but quite how thumping someone's face off with a pipe as opposed to a pistol makes it a more virtuous thing to do is beyond us

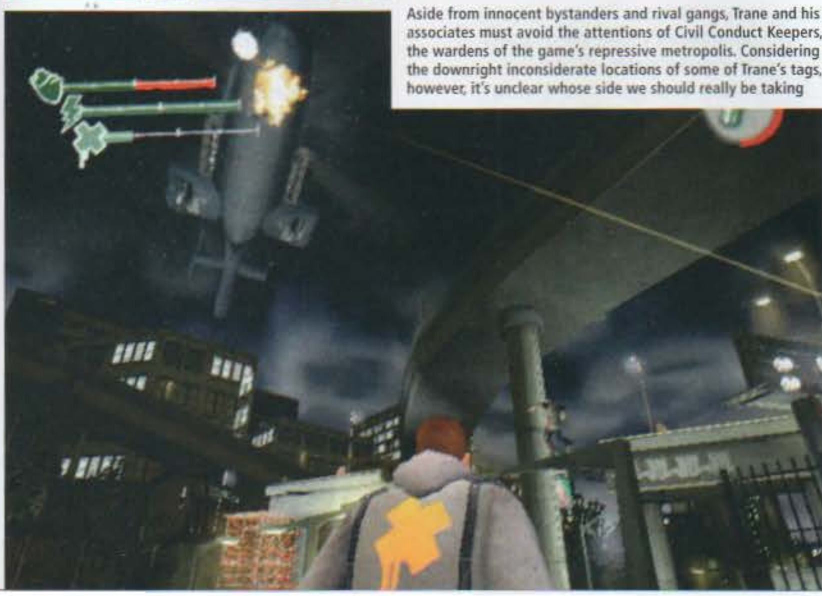
Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure

It may have the trappings of an All City King, but is this too institutionalised to truly make an impression?

Marc Ecko may well be the pantomime villain to end them all – one with a vision of what massmarket gamers want that'll awaken the red-top newspaper editor in pretty much everyone else. From an alluring iconoclastic pitch that held aloft the true culture of street writers (you'd be ill-advised to call them graffiti artists to their face) while denouncing that of their urban lackeys, *Getting Up* has adjusted its stance to become something actually quite disturbing, not to mention hypocritical.

In as polite a sense as possible, *Getting Up*'s primary target audience is known more for its fondness for sportswear than its love of guerrilla artistry, *Jet Set Radio* or *The Sands Of Time*. This is the first game, specifically, to integrate the act of flicking up a hoodie into its control scheme, the purpose being to sneak up on and mercilessly pulverise the council workers (damn their well-meaning, underpaid hides) responsible for painting over your elaborate tags. Perhaps we're to believe that such collateral acts of GBH (which extend to beating people with pipes, spraypainting their eyes and throwing them from rooftops) are unavoidable necessities of the fight against the game's fictitious police state. But as one character remarks, "Take *that*, New Radius," having daubed his assumed name above the fallen body of another civil engineer, a less reputable, less justified sociopathy seems to prevail.





Aside from innocent bystanders and rival gangs, Trane and his associates must avoid the attentions of Civil Conduct Keepers, the wardens of the game's repressive metropolis. Considering the downright inconsiderate locations of some of Trane's tags, however, it's unclear whose side we should really be taking

Jet Set Radio – the game that *Getting Up* abjectly refuses to associate with – at least had the wit, and dare we say the decorum, to be openly juvenile at the same time as being rebellious. As much as we want to recognise the genuine self-assuredness and vision of Ecko's game, it currently lacks the substance to make its po-faced attitude seem like anything other than a cynical play to the hearts and minds of an image-dependent mainstream. Its scenery-hugging, death-defying clambers are universally rigid, its combat rudimentary and its tag opportunities inflexibly assigned, even if the control system does remain intuitive.

It'll be a shame if such issues persist because, artistically at least, Ecko deserves a capable vehicle. The RZA-produced soundtrack, expressive frontend and perceptible energy of the New Radius cityscape are all commendable, and even the least welcome of the game's endeavours are carried off with a degree of flair. But the game itself needs to break free of its claustrophobic mould and allow its players to enjoy the tools it provides. Presumably, having fashioned such a generous inventory of sprays, stencils, stickers, rollers and pens, it's placed self-expression high on its feature list; we'll just have to see if The Collective can place it equally high above the final product's less savoury misdemeanours.

FORMAT: **PC,PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **THE COLLECTIVE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q4 2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E150**



Climbing fame

Besides treading on the toes of The Man and his employees, your objective in *Getting Up* is the accumulation of 'rep'. Leaving your mark on a city wall, billboard or vehicle increases your notoriety and respect with authorities and peers, and the greater the risk you undertake in doing so, the greater the reward. An intuition system visually seeks out whichever sweet spots are in the immediate vicinity, an assault course of pipes, ladders, ledges and support beams providing the means by which to reach them. Subway trains offer further opportunities while doubling as a perilous taxi service from one city location to the next. Of all its depicted risks, the game's most exhilarating moment so far has to be its impromptu dashes across bustling freeways.

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **TAITO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER**

Exit

Taito makes a surprise 2D comeback – but don't count on the elevators being in action





Some hazards are graded by level, requiring a corresponding item of that level to bypass (above). Others can be crossed with timing, faith and a last-second ledge grab (right)

If the PSP's TGS showing was any indication, Japanese developers seem to have noticed the dearth of original pick-up-and-play content on Sony's portable. Among the developers rushing to fill it was a recently energised Taito (at the time not yet subsumed by Square Enix), with its '50s American comics-inspired caper.

Mixing skewed, pastel-coloured 2D backgrounds with sharp 3D foreground elements to appealing effect, *Exit* follows everyday hero Mr Escape, tasked with freeing those stranded in urban disasters. In a further visual twist, Escape's animation is motion captured, with the attendant control quirk of many such 16bit platformers – response comes at the speed of the performance, not player input. Initially frustrating, it becomes obvious that Escape's motion is as much a part of the puzzles as his environment, challenging you to find the most time-effective sequence of dashes and jumps.

Outside of its occasional acrobatic demands, much of *Exit*'s gameplay is a series of block-pushing and lock-and-key situations – sometimes literally, to open locked doors – and in other cases to clear obstacles, such as dousing fire with an extinguisher. Once a character is rescued, Escape can work in tandem with them to overcome elements impassable alone, by hoisting over obstructions or flipping multiple switches.



Ten types of environment feature, each rendered in a super-cute manner, including hospitals, apartment blocks and subways – all with their own particular flavour of disaster and quirks of multistorey construction

With such an intentionally linear system, there's a concern over how well repetitive trial and error can be avoided, but Taito has pitched stages at an average of ten minutes, and encourages time attacks of under five. At least 100 stages will ship, along with the provision to download more.

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Goku Makaimura

King Arthur girds his boxer shorts for a long-overdue return – now PlayStation 'N Portable









Several types of magical armour and a selection of multi-shot weapons are the biggest additions to Arthur's kit. Capcom has yet to reveal many of the game's bosses – sure to be highlights

To date, Capcom hasn't so much supported the PSP as ported to the PSP, so early reports of a *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* title on the system met guarded interest. But as TGS (and a preshow spoiling in the Japanese press) proved, *Extreme G'NG* is an entirely new 2.5D title, back with the series' original designer, Tokuro Fujiwara.

The polygonised visuals are crisp and immediately recognisable, although in places a little over-angular, losing some of the original sprites' charm. But this switch in technology, as with *R-Type Delta* on the PS1, introduces more than smooth animation and free parallax scrolling: it makes the familiar seem new again. That newness was evident in the brutally short first attempts of many players, but a slightly relaxed difficulty curve saw most get within lance-throwing distance of the huge stage boss on repeat attempts.

Though its gameplay is recognisably of the series, this PSP iteration is shaping up to be the easiest *G'N'G* game yet. The overall decrease in difficulty is supplemented by some super-powerful weapons whose effects are rendered in 3D



G'NG's already varied arsenal has been expanded, with the demo fielding a multi-shot crossbow and arcing sickles. Another break with tradition is the backtracking (disregarding *Ghouls 'N Ghosts*' whole-game backtrack): while stages are still broadly linear, certain areas will only be accessible once Arthur has earned new abilities – including hovering and four-way attacks.

G'NG has always been about balance, and that's never been more important: as much as it impresses, the demo questions whether the PSP's controls, or even the PSP itself, are suited to its demands. But Fujiwara has pulled bigger magicians out of treasure chests in his time.

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **BANDAI**
DEVELOPER: **Q ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JANUARY 2006**

Every Extend Extra

Q Entertainment explodes on to Sony's portable platform again – and again, and again, and again



The bullet-spewing yawning mouths and, indeed, flying pigs (not pictured) are new, so the game's transfer to PSP has certainly gained more than a pretty fascia



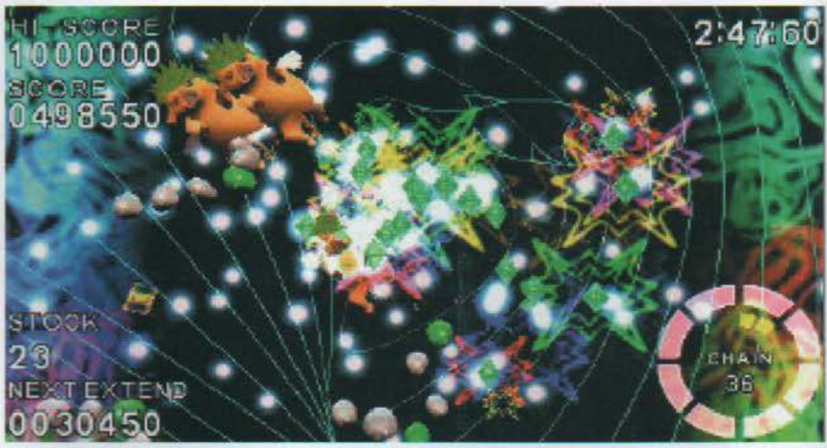


It's not hard to see why many took *EEE* to be the second coming of *Rez*, although its visual treatment intentionally has all the profundity of a rave projection

Though it's rumoured that Tetsuya Mizuguchi's studio is working on a second *Lumines* game, it presented a very different PSP sequel at the Tokyo Game Show. While obviously – perhaps concerningly – confusing to many first-time players, old hands may recognise *EEE* as an updated version of PC freeware title *Every Extend* (highlighted in **E**141's freeware shooter feature).

As in the original, it's a chain-bonus shooter with a twist: your craft is actually a guided bomb, and you get one shot per life. While there are streams of bullets to be dodged, it's not so much a matter of survival as of dying in the most damaging position – score well enough from the chain reaction triggered by your wake and you're awarded more lives to sacrifice. It's a simple, elegant concept, but many showgoers were struggling with the initial leap of understanding at the demo pods.

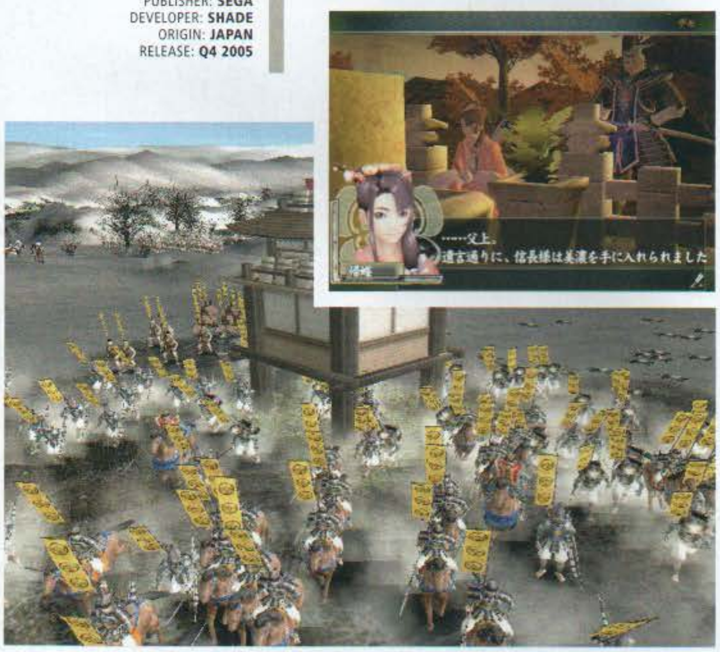
The '*Extra*' part finds the original game's unassuming abstract visuals given a Mizuguchi-style makeover (we're sure there's potential for a television series in this) of whirling geometry and waves of prismatic neon. Pace is kept by an almost bruisingly uptempo dance soundtrack, which we assume reacts to performance, and similarly to *Rez* and *Lumines* each in-game action triggers its own effect. Given the extent of the player's interaction with the environment, though, the latter seems limited to furious solos following a successful chain. The less easily dazzled may argue whether high production values are enough to elevate *EE* from freeware to commercial software – but extra content in the form of new boss encounters is already confirmed, and further features may be added in the run-up to its New Year release.



Tenkabito

A new strategy game adds Sega's banner to those already fluttering over medieval Japan's killing fields

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **SHADE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q4 2005**



***Tenkabito* shares *Sangokushi Taisen*'s card illustrator, Shishizaru, for 2D portraits (inset), but his stylised approach is only occasionally echoed in the game visuals, which choose samurai cinema scale over clarity**



The closest zoom level seems unusably impractical, but the option is there for those who wish to see their strategies enacted from a general in the field's viewpoint

While other developers' feudal warfare efforts sparred unsuccessfully with Koei's massed forces in the console market, Sega made its gambit in the arcades with card-based strategy title *Sangokushi Taisen*. Having succeeded there, it's now enlisted occasional collaborator Shade to bring a new samurai warfare title to PS2.

At least recognising that the platform isn't exactly at a loss for Warring States games, *Tenkabito* takes a realtime strategy approach, recalling both the early *Kessens* and *Shogun: Total War* – though the latter's developers have probably joined the Sega banner too late to offer military counsel. Visually, it's another remarkable display of latter-day PS2 power, with the expected trade-off of fine detail for breadth: battlefields sprawl to the horizon and enemy lines present an intimidating wall of banners. A varied, bright palette and occasionally stylised textures lift the overall design above the fog of war.

Battlegrounds range from level plains to more intricate affairs, including struggles for high ground on mountain ridges and castle assaults played out from within their maze of fortifications. Fire can be used on the field to raze obstacles or block off advances, but its use in denser areas risks spreading the blaze across the map. To aid environmental considerations, zoom levels range from a wargame-like distant isometric view through a panoramic swoop down to the action.

However assured the final game may be, *Tenkabito* can't help but feel like a strangely un-Sega release, and it's not clear which encampment of fans – whether of the brand or the genre – will take to it. Perhaps the best thing that could happen for Sega's growing role as a publisher would be for both groups to find something new in the title.



FROM OUT OF DARKNESS

Crystal Dynamics is a developer obsessed with the resurrection of dead heroes. In the case of Lara Croft, however, it's turning its eye to reincarnation instead

As much as you'd like to, there are some things you simply can't share with others. One of them, we've discovered, is the answer to the question: 'What do *you* want from *Tomb Raider Legend*?' Even an off-record brainstorming session with Eidos' senior European producer **Greg Housnam** fails to find the magic buzz-phrase to summarise our expectations, simply because such a thing doesn't exist. Not in words, at least.

Instead, the true appeal of *Tomb Raider* lies somewhere in among its sights, sounds and situations, communicable only between the player and the game. So when the new Lara emerges – inventory strapped in its visible entirety around shoulders, waist and thighs – to look out over the most resplendent waterfall this side of *Final Fantasy X-2*, with a mental click we have our answer. A few grid-free swings, shimmies and lever pulls later and the entire cascade of water splits and subsides to reveal the grand, overgrown face of a forgotten underworld. Another click. Our answer is confirmed.

"This being the seventh title that we've put out signifies how Lara, in many respects, is the face of Eidos," Housnam declares. "She's a videogame icon and a household name, and so the expectations are huge. We want to show that we recognise the need to push the brand and, indeed, the genre forward, and

TITLE: **LARA CROFT TOMB RAIDER: LEGEND**
FORMAT: **360, PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **CRYSTAL DYNAMICS**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q2 2006**



Crystal Dynamics was the developer with the experience and ability to do that."

Wrested from the hands of lifelong custodian Core Design, and from the brink of complete disownment by its jaded fans, *Tomb Raider* is looking surprisingly sprightly for a game so long in the tooth. But isn't it the case, we ask lead designer **Riley Cooper**, that while *Legend* marks the reinvention of Lara Croft, it's also just a return visit to some of her oldest haunts? "In setting out to do this project we very much did look at the original *Tomb Raiders*: what made them popular and why people like them, so in some ways that accusation is correct. But I think we have brought modern-day expectations to bear. The other part that's different is that we've gone for a more cohesive experience in terms of the game's systems, level design and story. Those things are more tightly interrelated than anything done on the series before."

Locked fittingly in a tomb of its own while Crystal formulates a more modern interpretation, the retired status of the series' previous code is *Legend*'s greatest show of promise. But as sincere as this return to the drawing board seems, aren't there inherent dangers in handing a characteristically Anglicised game over to Americans? "I don't believe so," Cooper replies. "The biggest guard against that – no pun intended – is Mr Gard. He really is empowered to manage Lara, which means he has a big impact."

UNIVERSAL TRAVELLER

As if reviving a series left by many for dead wasn't enough, Crystal has been given the additional task of re-dressing Lara for next-gen and handheld releases. On 360, should we expect a modest update or something more substantial? "When we convert assets, there's definitely time that goes into making them work on a new system," declares Cooper, "but I'd like to think we give that team a pretty good base. A lot of people at E3, when we showed our demo, never thought it was PS2 – they were always surprised. I think the fear is people will become so excited about the 360 version that they won't take the PS2 version seriously. It'd be a mistake, but I think it'll be that good."







The ability to juggle enemies with Lara's twin pistols is one of the game's modern twists. It'll be interesting to see whether this nod to *Devil May Cry* can be woven into a fluid close-range combat system







Gun emplacements have been revealed as a *Legend* feature. You'll just have to hope that they won't destroy the flow of the game's action with some ill-conceived, inappropriate turkey shoots

This is a return from voluntary exile for senior designer **Toby Gard**, a man who made such a break from both design tradition and his own résumé with *Galleon* that the last place you'd have expected to find him was in a consultancy role here. "I suppose it's been a lot more relaxing than normal," he reveals, his quintessentially British tones undiminished by Californian surrounds. "You know, I'm used to having to call all the shots and that's not the case here, so it's been a somewhat more chilled-out experience because I've been able to apply myself to smaller, more detailed parts of the game across various different points. It's remained interesting without that need to pull the whole thing along."

Introduced to virgin territory in 1996, Lara Croft is returning to an industry overpopulated by purposefully engineered plunderers of her own legacy. It may writhe with sex objects rather than symbols, but this orgy of half-baked heroines is quite capable of drowning even its more sophisticated competitors. Why, we ask Gard, should Lara still be considered relevant in such a crowded market? "I think it's exactly because she's not what you've just described the others to be," he suggests. "*Tomb Raider* is about a character who's extremely dangerous, very refined and who goes after mysteries. That's it in a nutshell, isn't it? The fact that it's not supposed to be playing the blatant sex card – that's what makes her interesting in the first place. I'm not sure there are many others like that – Jade from *Beyond Good & Evil*, I guess. But it's rare."

So here were are, then, at the point a few paragraphs into any post-2003 *Tomb Raider* article where we pay tribute to just how catastrophic a game its sixth instalment was. Pumped on to shelves by a gale of hot air about revolutionised controls and dramatic departures, it emerged a broken relic rather than a breakthrough. How else could you attempt to bury such ignominy than by starting over from scratch?

"That was the right approach that they chose," confirms Gard. "Crystal Dynamics didn't have a jot of code or a single bit of art from any of the previous games. So for them to have a stable base from which to really innovate the franchise, they needed to be able to create the fundamentals of what a *Tomb Raider* game is. That and push it forward in terms of implementation." This, however, isn't



to say that *Darkness* was completely ignored by the team. "I feel bad about how we occasionally slagged on it," admits Cooper. "But we also have to be careful about that because it reviewed horribly, so when we decided that we were going to compare ourselves to *Angel Of Darkness*, we knew it could lull us into a false sense of security where if we beat that game by getting, say, a 5.6 in our reviews, we still wouldn't have accomplished anything."

Would it be right to suggest that *Legend*'s back-to-basics approach is also a recognition that modern games of the genre have become too convoluted? "Well, it's a tough call, isn't it?" suggests Gard. "That's the question of whether or not a sequel is designed for all the people who played the previous games, or whether it's designed to bring in new people. The people who've played it before need to have something new and so you've either got to add new things into the formula or shake things up whilst still keeping to the theme."

And where, precisely, should the formula be augmented? Is it the job of the character to evolve, or should the surrounding environment and the events that transpire within provide the hook while the character itself provides the consistency? "That's what *Tomb Raider* did, though, didn't it? For, like, six games or something – just different stories. I'm not entirely sure that you can do that and keep people's interest up, to be honest. They certainly didn't manage to with *Tomb Raider* because it was just like playing endless mission discs with the odd extra people chucked in. That's not good enough. The story has to be new, the environments have to be interesting. You've just got to mix up the actual gameplay so people can think there's freshness there."

Beating a path through eight environments encompassing Burkina Faso, Bolivia and a modern urban location that Housnam insists is there "for a very good reason", *Legend* has been accordingly mixed up to make us appreciate that, in game terms, Lara isn't about exploration as much as she's about movement. This in turn highlights how potent the IP must have been to sustain the six comparatively handicapped adventures it has produced thus far. From the signature swan dive that drops you over a hundred feet into an early swimming segment, *Legend* grabs you because its character, for the first time, moves exactly as she should.

Elsewhere, the game's combat is something of an unknown, its *Devil May Cry*-inspired pistol juggles, for example, lacking the kind of close-quarters context they require. But the thoughtful rappel puzzles (do pay attention, EA), automatic ledge grabs (implemented to minimise 'silly deaths') and timing-dependent swing combos we've seen are already a convincing enough hook for now. Novel, if unproven touches such as a body-mounted torch that pops on automatically when darkness would otherwise impair your vision offer further assurance that *Legend* is at least thinking for itself. Considering the rigid cutaways of previous *Tomb Raider*s, it's also uplifting to see a similar degree of thought informing the new game's story.

"From the signature swan dive that drops you over a hundred feet, Legend grabs you because its character, for the first time, moves exactly as she should"





Swing combos allow for familiar obstacles such as those pictured above to be traversed without the intermittent pauses typically experienced. When finished, the game's animation system should link them seamlessly together



A permanent feature of Lara's utility belt, the new rappelling line comes into play not only when climbing and swinging, but at those times when the game's physics system must be manipulated



"We've done our best to bleed that edge – to get story deeper into the game," says Cooper. "It's actually one of my keen interests in action adventures. But there're a lot of limitations, particularly in thirdperson. Games like *Half-Life* have figured that in firstperson you can do a lot of storytelling because you're not looking at the central character. In a thirdperson game, if you're trying to have serious dialogue and the player has the character jumping around like a bunny rabbit, it becomes completely ineffective. But some of the things we have done include making our cutscenes skippable. We have lines from many of them where if you skip the cutscene during gameplay, the characters will say the key objective-related information in-game instead. We've looked at some of our cinematics and said that if they're not tied directly to a location or referring directly to each other or to something in the scene, we'll let the dialogue continue during gameplay. Even that's a bit of a risk and a challenge, because she'll still be jumping around while she's supposed to be talking, but we just feel the trade-off of allowing the story to play during the game is worth it."

Satisfied with such an assured flow of ideas, we return to the difficult question: what will a consumer want from this revived franchise once it's been rebuilt? "Because it's evolved so much, it's difficult to know what people want," admits Housnam. "But they're still interested in Lara Croft," Cooper later suggests. "Her character is fine. The issues that we've seen have been that people, almost because of how much they've liked Lara Croft, have come to hate the franchise because of how the games have been done. Primarily, that's because they haven't changed for six titles. So really that's the biggest hurdle – to overcome the backlash."

KAIN ENABLED

Much of *Legend*'s creative team cut its teeth on Crystal's solid *Legacy Of Kain* series – a fact that isn't without its upshots. "There're a few similarities that make me laugh, to be honest," says Cooper. "For fans of that series it'll make them laugh too. Most of those similarities, though, are pure coincidence – they just happened and I was, like: 'I can't believe we're doing that again'. But I won't say what they are – fans will have to find those for themselves. I guess beyond that, as far as the strict design is concerned, it's a very different game. It's been a pretty ambitious title and Lara's animation system and controls, as well as our physics-based world, are something that those games didn't have."



TITLE: **TITAN QUEST**
FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **IRON LORE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2006**

HITTING MYTH

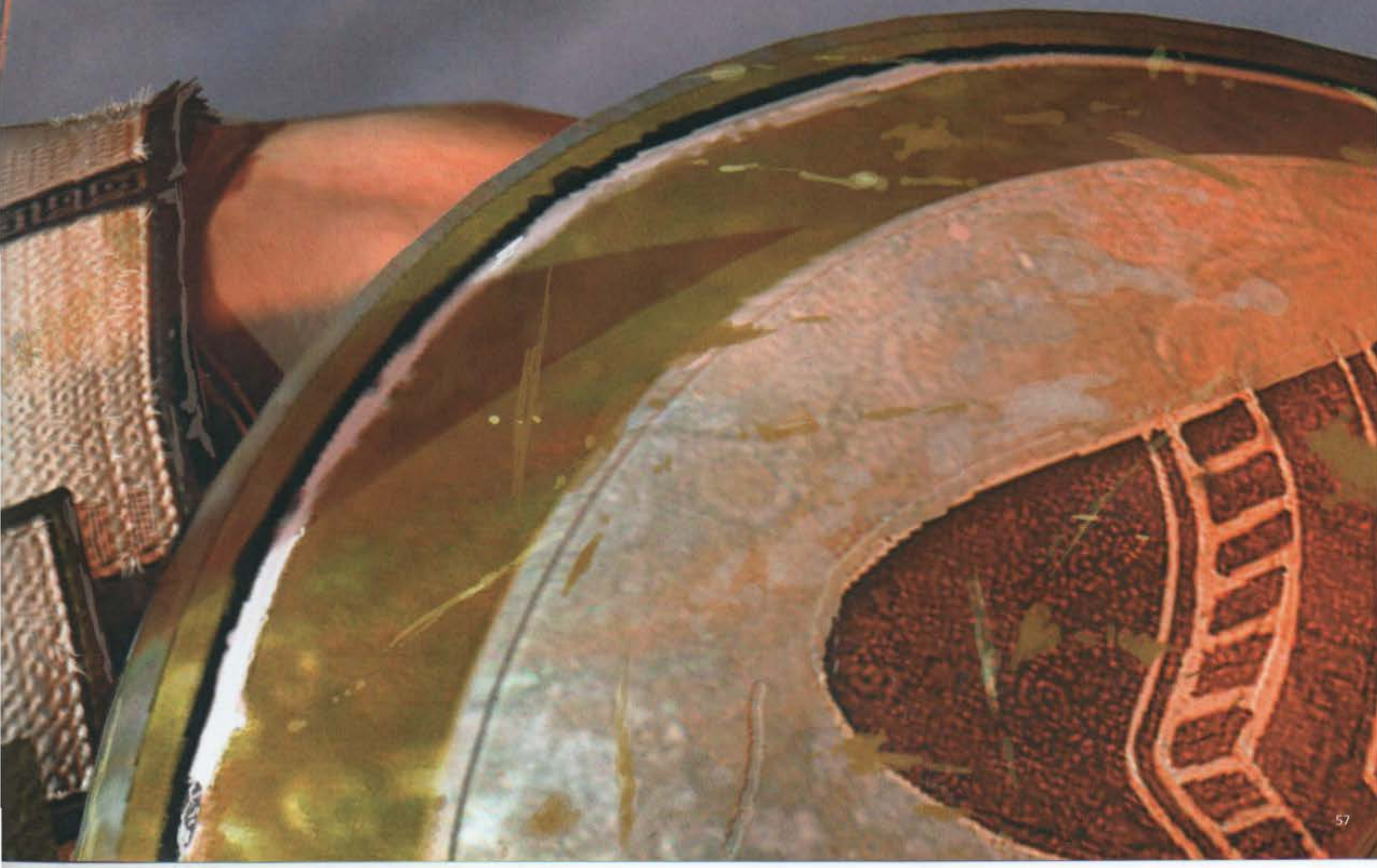
One of the minds behind Age Of Empires rewrites the action-RPG template from pulp, dark and grisly to noble, sundrenched and refined

From the glittering Aegean coast to the dusky floodplains of the Nile, the ancient world has reliably provided fertile ground for the PC's crop of strategy, city-building and warfare titles. After two entries in the *Age Of Empires* series he co-designed, though, **Brian Sullivan** was looking to remake history in a different genre.

"At the time, realtime strategy was stuck in a rut, and so I was stuck in a rut," he recalls. "But I'd seen games like *Command & Conquer* and *WarCraft* spawn a whole bunch of quality titles in the RTS market, while in the action-RPG genre there really was nothing else with the production values and quality of *Diablo*."

Leaving Ensemble in late 2000, Sullivan founded his new studio Iron Lore in 2001, initially running it self-funded from a Massachusetts basement as prototyping work began on *Titan Quest*. Three years of production later, Iron Lore has expanded (and moved out of the basement), the game's content has swollen to suitably epic proportions and the genre – having suffered the gradual disintegration and final closure of *Diablo* developer Blizzard North – is still waiting for its second wave.

If it's initially surprising that wave has carried us into a lavishly recreated Mediterranean, it lasts only a few moments into watching the developers fend off satyrs in the foothills of













Villages and cities alike bustle with an obsessive attention to animated detail. Hopefully, NPC conversation will be as inviting as the surroundings













Iron Lore nestles in the cavernous red-brick halls of a refurbished textile mill. Left: lead content designer Tom Potter. Right: president and lead designer Brian Sullivan

Greece, or dodge masonry hurled by the restless dead of Egyptian necropoli. Where typical RPG fantasy pays lip service to ancient cultures, *Titan Quest* spins historically inspired myth – although Sullivan admits there's a pragmatic reason for the choice, too. "I think casual players are more attracted to familiar topics like history and mythology – traditionally, they don't play fantasy or sci-fi titles, and I guess that's because they think: 'Only nerds play fantasy games, and I'm not a nerd'. Even hardcore players are very motivated to play historically themed games: it certainly didn't hurt *Age Of Empires*."

Not so much a dungeon crawl as a nature ramble, environments are dense with fine detail and animation, finding constant, hypnotic motion even when the player is still. As the almost blindingly bright daylight fades, long shadows grow and shift in the firelight, until even the aforementioned tombs are a showcase of subtle colour and movement. "Technology, up until recently, favoured crawling through rectangular hallways," chuckles Sullivan, "but it was very important to us to create a world where people want to spend some time."

The sense of scale and place is remarkable, aided by the team's ability to realise mythical beasts in as near-photorealistic detail as the frescoes on walls and hyacinths in the fields, but the setting's effect on the actual mechanics seems far less pronounced. Then again, reinventing the one-click-fits-all template for the sake of the period would probably have been self-defeating. "We try to put a topical flavour on all the gameplay, although even that's a little difficult because travelling through locations like Babylon and Egypt means you can't just have 'Apollo's fire spell'," Sullivan says. "The biggest influence is on the monsters, and to some degree the storyline. But we want to entertain, not educate – although we do have an in-game encyclopaedia so players can read more about what we reference, if they want. It's what I call 'Hollywood history': we're more focused on people's expectations, and that makes for great drama."

Hearteningly, Iron Lore's treatment of the game as a cinematic experience doesn't involve cinematic sequences, instead turning to thoughtful use of audio, animation and level design. As the quest gathers pace, the soundtrack (mixed from multiple musical cues in realtime) builds towards an epic theme; as your characters' skills grow, the corresponding actions gain weight or grace. Chapters conclude with a playable visual reward – your arrival at great cities, from Athens to Babylon and beyond. One area in which *Titan Quest* may

Lighting is technically excellent, with a natural result giving the game a sense of life stills cannot replicate. The engine will be fully scaleable





Titan Quest's scale doesn't stop at the environments: larger enemies dwarf the player, and the game's toughest and most impressive foes are another several magnitudes larger again

confound expectations – borne of both Hollywood history and the brutality of the mythic period – is in its bloodless presentation.

"We're trying not to do anything that will limit our appeal to a broader audience – the size of the PC market could easily triple if more games were made with casual appeal," explains Sullivan. "I don't think blood is going to sell more copies to 13-year-old boys. Instead of decapitations we have fantastic effects, great animation, ragdoll physics – so the combat is visceral, very fun, but not all about body parts."

As accessible as *Titan Quest* is on the surface, how casual players will take to the underlying min-maxing may prove another matter. Abandoning fixed character classes, players choose two 'skill tabs' from an available eight during play, each containing a unique skillset. Levelling up provides the choice of increasing the power of base skills, altering their effects with complementary skills or increasing an overall mastery of the entire tab. The intention is to avoid redundant skills and encourage character diversity, but it seems at first glance to be a high-end approach to a high-end issue. "Any game has to be easy to learn and hard to master, because if you don't have that, then there's no depth for the hardcore players," reasons Sullivan. "But we want to make the game work both for players who explore every inch and kill every monster, and the ones who just run through the world following the story."

As for the concern that those less career-minded players running through the world may trip over the attendant pop-up tables of chances to hit, crit, stun, confuse, poison, buff and more, Sullivan is confident of their ability to adapt: "My wife is pretty hooked on *World Of WarCraft*, and she could barely handle the camera early on – it's tough if you've never used it before. Now she's into guilds, and crafting, and has some scheme on the auction houses with a Horde and an Alliance character. She went amazingly quickly from being an incredibly casual player to a very sophisticated one."

"I don't think blood is going to sell more copies. Instead of decapitations we have fantastic effects, so the combat is fun, but not all about body parts"



Despite the fall of the house of *Diablo*, independent developers are creating diverse and interesting paths for the action-RPG: *Titan Quest* looks to a golden past and mass acceptance, while Flagship's *Hellgate: London* predicts a dark future in an unashamedly gamer's game. "I met [Flagship's] Bill Roper at Leipzig, and they also feel there's a lot of people who really like this kind of gameplay," agrees Sullivan. "And Castaway [an ex-Blizzard North Bay Area developer, also working on an action-RPG], their head guy was actually happy to see our game, because it validated the action-RPG as a viable genre that can get a big audience. It's funny: when we were talking to publishers, and my guess is Castaway is having the same issues, a lot of them say: 'RPGs don't sell well, we don't want to fund them'. You bring up that *Diablo* sold five million copies – 'That's an exception, you can't count that'. They don't see that if you make a product that good, it'll sell."



Not all enemies are click-fodder: some have player skills, and will use them. It's wise to pay attention to their weapons and armour, too – they show threat and the spoils of victory, as a slain foe drops its equipment

AGE OF EDITORS

At the risk of stealing the actual game's glory, *Titan Quest* will ship with an editor that more than lives up to its aim of being the most powerful and accessible mod tool to date. Landscapes are sculpted with a moment's click-and-drag, then textured with the ease and functionality of a paint-program airbrush tool. Map creators who previously spent hours carefully transitioning grass tiles to rock tiles will be relieved, or possibly alarmed, to find that they can blend textures at any point with that same spraypainted ease. All 15,000+ art assets are available for placement, water levels can be set and the flow of rivers waypointed, and finally ambient light, sound, and quest scripting overlaid. Then it can all be endlessly tweaked, as lead content designer **Tom Potter** demonstrates after creating an area from scratch in ten minutes, then spending the next 20 obsessively smoothing its imperceptible rough edges. "I just can't leave it alone," he apologises.

Apart from a revamp of its forbidding developer-level UI, the editor will be the exact tool Iron Lore created the game with: "It's going to be interesting having people releasing content that's potentially better than what we've done," says Potter. "If you really want to dig in, everything's there to do it."



Titan Quest certainly has the production design to test that theory, and its team – drawing on talent from backgrounds as proven, and occasionally unlikely, as Papyrus, Nintendo Of America, Turbine and Looking Glass – show an attention to detail far beyond a work ethic. Sullivan is similarly determined to achieve more than simply getting his title to the shelves: "I really believe that the RPG could be the largest genre in PC gaming," he states firmly. "On the shooter side, there's so much technology that a lot of publishers just say: 'Here's an engine, here's a team, let's throw some money at it'. There's not so much available technology for RPGs, and they've traditionally been poor sellers, so they're overlooked while shooters – often not even good quality or very original ones – keep getting pumped out. I'm hoping that if we're successful, we can revitalise the whole genre." It seems the game's protagonist isn't alone in a quest to overturn the reign of the titans.



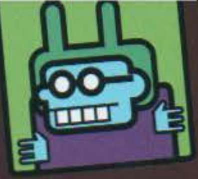


RHYTHM FACTION

2001's PS2 highlight Frequency showed Harmonix was reading from a very different set list to the rest of the industry. Four years on, we go backstage with the Boston independent

If you're a fan of Harmonix Music Systems' games, you can probably imagine what their sixth-floor Cambridge, Massachusetts studio looks like in much the same way you once saw *Frequency* tunnels in your sleep. Each section is painted in a different rich tone, as if waiting to offer a streak of checkpoint bonuses for crossing the office. We pass walls of concept paintings and a ceiling of support tubing and fairy lights; treasures as bulky as a ride-on *STUN Runner* cabinet and unassuming as a sealed copy of VCS *Journey Escape* ('A rock concert can be perilous for the performers. Even for one of the world's hottest groups, Journey').

What you might not expect is that it's quiet, save the minimalist ambient symphony of hard drive fans – this turns out to be a post-wrap lull,



Old-school Harmonix staff have two business cards – the current, officious text version and an original 'retro' version bearing their personal *Frequency* FreQ







as current projects *Karaoke Revolution Party* and *Guitar Hero* have closed their respective ten- and nine-month development cycles. Creative director **Josh Randall** is obviously pleased by our reaction: Harmonix has turned out a double album in the time his previous studio, Looking Glass, would have taken to finalise a tracklist: "I've definitely learned the power of making decisions that you stick with – we had to on the first *KR*, as we only had six months," he says. "And that's hard with the games we make here, as there's a lot of experimentation."

Rapid-fire experimental music titles are a risky product line for a young studio, but Harmonix isn't exactly a young studio, currently in its tenth year. VP of product development **Greg LoPiccolo** quickly dispels the notion that its formative pre-videogame days were spent preparing for a rhythm-action future, though: "I'd like to say that it was some grand plan, but it really wasn't at all. Alex and Eran [Rigopulos and Egozy, founders] had all this investor money and a kind of abstract concept to 'leverage technology to empower non-musicians to make music'. Which is an *awesome* premise, really profound and inspirational, but they hadn't really been successful in realising it in any commercial way. Then a few months after I showed up in '98, *PaRappa* and *Beatmania* hit, and we were like: 'Hey, wait, this is it!'"

Like Randall, LoPiccolo and several other Harmonix staffers migrated from Looking Glass – a creative rebirth that may seem as unexpected as Tetsuya Mizuguchi's progress from *Sega Rally* to *Rez*. In fact, the two were already hip-deep in Boston's music scene,

"When I saw PaRappa, I realised it was the game I'd always wanted but never knew could exist"

and for all Looking Glass' beautiful brains, their hearts were at Harmonix.

"In my personal art and music, I'd always been trying to create this synergy of video and audio using computers, and when I saw *PaRappa*, I realised it was the game I'd always wanted but never knew could exist," says Randall. "So I was saying: 'I want to make games like this!' at Looking Glass [laughs]. When I got the opportunity to come here, I was ready to rock. Literally."

"We were both sort of peripheral to the serious nerd Looking Glass core," LoPiccolo says, "though it was a privilege to have been involved, because they were really smart, and fierce, making amazing stuff and changing the world – I loved working on those games. But that wasn't culturally where we were coming from. Here, it was much more of a blank slate, and we iterated on the *Frequency* prototype internally for a year, then took it to Sony and they bought it in 15 minutes."

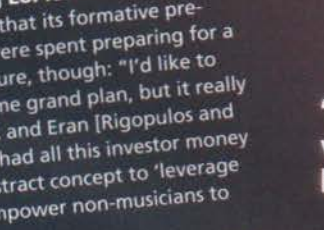
Harmonix's first encounter with the publisher was partly due to the PS2 arriving at the right moment, but both companies obviously recognised a meeting of agendas in the concept.

"We showed it to everybody," says LoPiccolo, "although Sony were our first choice, because they seemed sort of hip and musical and connected – Microsoft was an unproven commodity at that point, and Nintendo were such a closed group that it was intimidating. And sure enough, we were halfway through the first pitch to Sony and they said: 'Yeah, we think we'd like this.' We were like, 'But we have eight slides left!'" he laughs.

In a sense, *Frequency* would be the lost, last Looking Glass game. Mechanically brilliant, challenging in its iconoclasm, self-indulgent in its abstraction and with the voice of SHODAN on tutorial duties, it had everything to offer and everything to lose.

"I remember a lot of us explicitly saying: 'We're not going to make a Looking Glass game'," recalls LoPiccolo. "We'd come off *Thief*, which was super-deep and involved, took forever to make, had all these highly developed systems… So we'd go to the other extreme. At least we thought we were [laughs], we weren't actually *doing* that, but we wanted this glossy game where stuff explodes on the screen, and it's all very simple."







"Our first intention was that you're up there performing, so we have to make you look as fabulous as possible and relate your performance to what's happening at the venue," explains *KR* producer Tracy Rosenthal-Newsom. A steady rise in songs, outfits and neon across three titles plateaus in *KR Party* (p68)

From left: audio QA lead Naoko Takamoto, producer Tracy Rosenthal-Newsom and *Karaoke Revolution Party* design lead Elena Siegman strike a pose





"I think in our hearts we hoped people were just going to get it, and embrace it," says Randall. "I remember watching people walk past our booth at E3, look at *Frequency* and think: 'I don't know what that is, so I'm not going to play it', and keep walking. And I was like: 'I think we might have screwed up'. But if we grabbed someone and sat them down, we couldn't tear them away."

"We had such a free hand for that game, to make the game we wanted," LoPiccolo reflects. "We'd just been watching the early videos of *Rez*, which we were blown away by, and we'd already committed to that wireframe look."

"And when we saw *Rez*, we thought: 'Man, other people are doing it too, so we must be on the right track! We're on a roll!'" They both laugh.

"We weren't nearly as cognisant as we should have been, and subsequently became, about how to welcome people into our games," LoPiccolo says. "Even for *Amplitude* – because Sony was certainly aware of it: 'You've got to get characters into this somehow' – we bolted it on in a half-baked way. But that was a real hard design problem for us, even though we were very confident of the *experience*, the degree to which it blended musical expression and gameplay. I guess *GH* is like a mutant child of *Amplitude* and *KR*."

Karaoke's revolution within the company was to put characters on show in all their future titles – not necessarily for the player's benefit, but for their audience, as LoPiccolo explains: "One of the things we learned from *KR* is that if you're playing, you don't really care about the characters – but everybody around you does. Being able to hang the game emotionally off of people, just the mocap alone..." He looks to *Guitar Hero* designer **Rob Kay**, a softly spoken ex-pat who has already acquired the enthusiastic 'like's of the Harmonix locals.

"It adds a lot in terms of warmth," Kay nods, "and when people see it, they want to be a part of that world. The combination of that and a guitar controller makes it so accessible: just looking at it you know what you have to do in the game."

Another play for accessibility was *Amplitude*'s revival of American coin-op sensibilities, the unending attract sequence of its bold, confident colour and constant movement ready to broadcast across some fantasy arcade. Randall agrees animatedly: "Oh, yeah. We have sketches of the *Frequency* arcade game, and stuff like: 'We could put this in nightclubs, and network it so you're playing people from the UK, Japan and New York', even though it wouldn't be nighttime at the same time, and you wouldn't be able to hear what you're doing in a nightclub." He rolls his eyes. "We'd abandoned that hope by *Amplitude*, but we were all big arcade-game heads, so we decided to pump up that aesthetic. And I think it paid off. I was playing *Robotron* in an old-school arcade in LA last week, and thinking: 'This is totally what we did'."

Though the arcades would be deprived of surround-cabinet freestyling, Randall was at least able to realise a ride-on game without the ride in *EyeToy: AntiGrav*.

While it featured a strong musical element in Apollo 440's adaptive soundscape, it seemed a surprising turn for a Harmonix game's soundtrack to relinquish centre stage.

"We made *Frequency*, which didn't do well, and then we made *Amplitude* on faith – Sony's faith – which didn't do well, and they came back and said: 'Look, we just can't fund another one of these, but we respect your abilities as designers'," explains LoPiccolo. "Basically, Sony wanted to work with us, and had an opportunity that needed a lot of ground-up design work in a short amount of time. We were able to develop good enough tech to support the concept – we knew we didn't want a game where it's blurry video of you, in your living room, hitting things – which they liked, and gave us a year, and then Rob came on to head up the design effort a few months later."

"I first saw the prototype when I came over for an interview," says Kay, "I remember them describing the game to me, and I was like: 'Oh my god, they're exploring something that no one else is exploring, and I need to work here'. It was an incredibly big learning experience, learning how to create in a new space where you know you're going to make mistakes."

"It was another of these games where we tried to refine the process of doing something new efficiently," continues LoPiccolo. "Technically, it was our most ambitious thing ever. We had to ship it in September, and we went to E3 in July with a detection system that we scrapped a week later. But it came together, and it has a lot of potential for the future. We were right up against the limit of what the PS2 and the EyeToy can do, and when it breaks, it's a drag. But if the EyeToy is a core component for the PS3, and you have a Cell to devote just to image analysis, it could be a lot better."

And Harmonix will be ready for it, in the





Centre image: creative director Josh Randall. This image (from left): producer Daniel Sussman, VP of product development Greg LoPiccolo, art director Ryan Lesser, and *Guitar Hero* design lead Rob Kay in various phases of rocking out

same fashion that its two beat-matching games and four singalong titles threw a party and *Guitar Hero* came. "We had an understanding of both the peripheral side of things and the music game side of things," says Kay, "so we knew what *GH* would be pretty early on. Recently we started a postmortem process for our projects, and I went back to the design doc, revision one for milestone one – and 95 per cent of it is in the game."

Each new title benefits from the studio's experience of working with each other as much as the technology – encouraged by a collective design process and an internal network of newsgroups constantly humming with shared media and ideas. While the wider game industry continues its awkward love affair with cinema, Harmonix has already realised how much gaming could learn from getting out to catch a few gigs.

"For me, one of the strongest connections between music and gaming came early on, when we took these pop

"To go to a music game where the level designer is Jimi Hendrix, or Eric Clapton – you learn so much about level design"

songs, split them out into components and made beat-matching gameplay out of each one," says LoPiccolo. "And that each one ended up being this really detailed experiential landscape, but dictated by another medium, is fascinating. It frees you up in a way, experiencing the flow of this other media – and we've just scratched the surface of what you can do."

"I came from a level design background – you know, how do you create this experience from moment to moment that takes you through a level in 3D?" says Kay. "And then to go to a music game where the level designer is Jimi Hendrix, or Eric Clapton – you learn *so much* about level design from them, the way they deal with repetition. There's a whole lot that musicians do which could be mapped directly back to level design, and we get it for free, almost."

So is there scope for closer collaboration between developers and recording artists? "Yeah, but the stars have to align," says LoPiccolo. "The major artists have their way of working, and they don't have a lot of time for: 'We need this all broken out, and it's gotta loop at eight bars, and transition to the sad theme at 12 bars'. Generally you have your choice of pretty static stuff from big names, or flexible stuff from people you've never heard of. We never got any negative feedback from anybody, but I have a strong suspicion 90 per cent of them didn't actually see or play the games. There's a few people… I think Bowie knows what's going on."

"He was really cool," agrees Randall. "We were interested in doing Freqs of the actual artists, and he said: 'Sure, I'll be in your game', and gave us all this artwork so we could model him. And we did, and he looked great – but we were running out of time, and couldn't set the Freqmaker to not allow alterations. So basically, people could put a skirt on Bowie, which his management wasn't happy with. But he's in the archives!"

Even if musicians continue to gain interest in game audio, it's another matter to encourage developers to gain interest in it, and for the medium to enjoy the same constant improvement that visuals command. Randall feels that it's part of a wider issue, rather than a snub exclusive to game development: "Most people don't experience music on a very detailed level: they don't realise that there's all these intricacies in their favourite song that can be extracted and presented in a whole new way. What we've been up against in a lot of our games is how musically detailed they can be without people not getting what's happening. You watch a first-time rhythm-action player just doing this [button-pressing] motion to the beat – they respond to it on a very different level at first, just reading cues, then the rest of their body gets into it, and they figure out they're interacting with the song in a totally new way."

"We're mostly PS2 developers, and there's not that much you can do with audio on it – we worked our asses off to get a resonant filter into *Amplitude*, and nobody even noticed," laughs LoPiccolo. "Total wasted effort. No, it was a moral victory. But next-gen consoles will be able to synthesise really good-sounding stuff in realtime. Then it's a question of whether we can make it meaningful for non-musician gamers to open up a filter or synthesise guitar feedback, for them to *get* it in the same way they intuitively get graphics."

"There's a lot more space to explore," feels Kay, "as there are so few people doing this, you can make pretty big leaps on individual games even if you haven't got that long to develop them."

But does Harmonix's positioning as a developer of titles that need to be heard and felt, rather than screen-captured and benchmarked, mean it starts the next generation race at a disadvantage? LoPiccolo draws in his breath. "I think it's fair to say that there's no publishers with an



AntiGrav's lens-flare-and-vertigo sci-fi has memorable spectacle to spare, but the concept art of its fantastical, DaVinci-like forerunner, *Fly*, was equally intriguing





awareness of new designs that will be powered by next-gen audio technology – but that's sort of not their job. People will need new music titles for their consoles, and they'll come to us and we'll build them. But in terms of specific things we can do, they're not that dialled-in, and they won't be until we have a prototype and can say: 'Here it is'. People won't look to music games... what am I trying to say?"

"When new consoles come out you always get this thing where it's just last generation's games at first, and then one or two come along with a totally new experience, an aspect that defines the next generation." offers Kay. "I'm looking forward to those games, and obviously we're going to try and make them."

LoPiccolo nods emphatically: "Yeah, our dream scenario is to show up with a new paradigm of some sort, which may or may not have a lot to do with the processing power of the console."

Are there renewed possibilities in the 'non-game experience' angle, given Nintendo Of America's unlikely E3 championing of *Electroplankton*, or the equally unexpected Microsoft-and-Minter-together-at-last Neon?

"My take is that it needs a compelling videogame experience in order for people to shell out to play it on their game console." Randall says. "There's a million guys cranking out super-fun music toys – every day I see a blog post saying: 'Check out this crazy thing where you move your mouse and it makes sounds and visuals'. I'd love to do something that just allows people to be creative, but I know people just won't buy it [laughs]. I think our mission is to try and do it in a way that plays by videogame rules, rather than: 'Hey, it's a freeform creative playground!' Because there are a lot more people who like playing games than who like being creative."

"Every project we kick off, we try to figure out a couple of ways to sneak it in, like, remix modes – we had to cut it out of *GH*, but we had a solo improvisational mode that was *almost* awesome," says LoPiccolo. "We do love that stuff and want to bridge the gap between play and creativity, but it can't be the focus, because you can't count on people to want to do it. They want to save the princess."

Randall continues: "It's been really cool to make these games that hold people's hands and lead them into the experience, and we're constantly getting emails from gamer kids: 'Now that I've played *Freq* and *Amp* I want to be a musician, what keyboard and drum machine should I buy?' It's awesome that they've gotten a glimpse of what they could become and have decided to go for it. That's been hugely rewarding for me." He considers for a moment. "I mean, I would love to make playground stuff, really."

LoPiccolo roars with laughter: "But we've sort of been through all that. We're jaded, bitter people now."

CONTINUED >











Song And Dance's horizontally scrolling move cues are a clever design solution. As with *DDR*, once you stop reading them and start dancing to the song you're singing, the bonuses mount up



THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

The latest KR steps up to the microphone and on to the dance mat

TITLE: **KARAOKE REVOLUTION PARTY**
FORMAT: **GC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **KONAMI**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER (US), TBA (UK)**

"Imagine doing this after drinking heavily," instructs *Karaoke Revolution Party* project leader **Tracy Rosenthal-Newsom**. Really, she could be referring to any part of *KRP*, but at the moment lead designer **Elena Siegman** and audio QA lead **Naoko Takamoto** are sharing control of a minigame by performing as vocal theremins.

"This is also a good way to pick up people at a party," Siegman notes between ululations.

"It's like a mating call," agrees Takamoto.

Now on its fourth iteration, the *KR* series has sashayed and glitzed its way into US audiences' hearts with a presentation as gregarious as *SingStar*'s is carefully neutral. Rosenthal-Newsom explains: "It's about having a crowd that loves you when you're doing well – everyone on screen loves you, everyone in the room loves you, and you get that immediately."

Unless your rendition is so poor that you empty the venue, of course – was there a concern that the exaggeratedly disastrous receptions would make for bruising stage debuts? "You can get kicked off, but you have to work really hard at it," says Siegman. "It's a karaoke thing that people will make a joke out of how bad they are, and we take that joke a little bit further. But people laugh at it – it's not meant to hurt."

While *KRP*'s additions include a detailed character creation suite, a trio of minigames (smartly, these can be shuffled into a party songlist rather than relegated to one-shot diversion) and expanded duet modes, its most striking new feature is the dance mat-supporting Song And Dance.

"We knew really early on that singing and dancing would be fun," says Siegman, "but there were a lot of worries about the difficulty: in the playtests *DDR* players would blow the whole game away, and others would trip over their own feet."

"It was hard to find that range, because our audience is so broad and we had to design perfectly for everybody," says Rosenthal-Newsom. "And suddenly you had two different things to look at, and to figure out how the scores combine, and still have anybody at a party step up and play. But I still remember playing the first prototype, and knowing *instantly* that it rocked. It merged today's technology with all the games we played as kids."

"Like singing with your hairbrush in front of the mirror, but you can hear the crowd cheering and get a giant pink halo around you," agrees Siegman. "The biggest challenge was to make it easy to pick up, jump in and have a lot of fun with, but also satisfying for players who really love the game."

The team can count themselves among those players, Rosenthal-Newsom describing a "family closeness" which drives them through crunch situations such as a marathon Crazy In Love singback: "Twenty-eight times," grimaces Takamoto. "*Twenty-eight* times."

"But another of our processes, that goes back all the way to *Frequency*, is to bring people in from outside and playtest throughout development," she continues. "We're only as good as how much fun you think the game is – we're good game designers and music experts, but we learn so much by watching someone else play." With that, the mat is cleared, the mic is passed, and the first bars of – aptly – Do You Really Want To Hurt Me? sound.

Sing start

"Way back on the original *KR* Josh and I led the project, and the company are mostly musicians, but mostly not singers," grins Rosenthal-Newsom. "So I'm starting to notice no one's really playing the prototype, and the few people that are do it on their own with the door closed. I realised the only way the game was going to work was if people would break out, and I'm a mediocre singer, but in the middle of the big pit over there I just started singing our really horrible demo song. And breaking the ice, being bad in front of each other, really helped the whole environment. They'll all rock out on *Guitar Hero* forever – they all love it, they're all musicians, but singing is something where people have to break that wall. And now at our Christmas parties everyone will get up and sing, and three hours will go by. It's fun to have seen that evolution over time."







Lengthy chords provide the opportunity to wail on the controller's whammy bar. Harmonix also hoped to include a stomp box – the controller bears a jack for its possible inclusion in a sequel

WE COULD BE HEROES

Harmonix cashes in its DualShocks and comes out with a Gibson

There was a moment, after we'd finished our own awkward fretboard fumblings and handed the guitars over to the *real* rockstar designers, where the room was in perfect syncopation – those without guitars moving empty fingers instinctively through the rhythms, trading technique hints on Expert mode's tougher licks. It's proof not only of *Guitar Hero*'s hypnotic group appeal, but also of the challenges that face even its creators.

"It was a constant struggle to find the sweet spot between it being accessible and making sure there was enough at the top end for the freaks out there who're better than us," says producer **Daniel Sussman**. "And we know those guys are out there."

"People can walk up and play the first handful of songs on Easy, and get it enough to feel good and continue on," explains art director **Ryan Lesser**, "but then there's this giant ramp all the way up to the upper spectrum of Expert. It's different to the dexterity that people have acquired using joypads, it's real guitar stuff – there's power chords, mini chords, little finger runs, and when you get good at it you start doing hammer-ons and pull-offs without ever using your right hand. It feels great once you get up there."

In keeping with the game's theme of providing 'a little slice of rock life', *Guitar Hero* is suffused with music culture far in excess of its licensed (cover) tracks. It starts with the controller, modelled on a Gibson SG with the blessing of the manufacturer – much to the developers' relief.

"When we were drafting these guys up, we were really going for the Gibson SG look, so the deal really worked out for us," laughs Lesser, brandishing the controller proudly.

"That was frozen way before we nailed Gibson, yeah," agrees LoPiccolo. "We had lots of different brands at the prototype stage, but then RedOctane approached Gibson and worked out an exclusive. And if you want to do an entire game with one brand, that's it."

Players can also earn Guitar World magazine cover billing after knockout performances, and the game locales and frontend are plastered with posters from rock art icons such as Shepard Fairey, Tara McPherson and The Little Friends of Printmaking. Then there's the in-jokes, like a loading screen amp progressively cranked to 11 ("First bullet point on the design doc: anything that can go up to 11 goes up to 11," laughs Sussman).

Is Harmonix hoping to breed a new generation of guitar players with the game? "Well, we're not *teaching* anybody to play guitar," Sussman clarifies. "We're trying to inspire the interest."

Lesser continues: "Near the end, one of the things we say is: 'OK, now go out and buy a real guitar!' So we're hoping that people do. I think it will happen – maybe not en masse, but if it was all being played through the controller, it would have less of a chance. For *Amplitude* it was a digital controller with a very digital soundscape, but you're holding this [guitar] in your hands, and when you're playing good you're like: 'I can totally play guitar'."

"It fed into the song selection," LoPiccolo says, "it's like a blast of rock history all the way back to the '60s. It's the hope that an 11-year-old can finish the game and have this urge to get a real amp and a guitar..."

"And a whole bunch of AC/DC CDs," smiles Sussman.

TITLE: **GUITAR HERO**
FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **REDOCTANE**
DEVELOPER: **HARMONIX**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER 2005 (US), TBA (UK)**

Rock 101

"This was the perfect team for this game," says Lesser, "all rockers or lovers of rock. With *Frequency* and *Amplitude*, half the team was super-into it, and the other half was creative enough to get behind them, but here everyone was pretty hardcore." It's also an all-male team, which surprises Sussman more than it does us – "It's weird, our teams are never all-male, except for this one."

Despite this heavy rock quotient, Sussman is confident mere mortals will be up to the task: "[Lead designer] Rob, who doesn't play guitar, was fumbling worse than anyone we've ever showed the game to in here, and at this point he's finished it on Expert."

Kay continues: "We playtested with people who play guitar, people who'd played *Guitar Freaks*, and others who were totally fresh, so we've tried to sculpt the gameplay around that, and also the tutorials. There's one to get you up and running, another for game mechanics, and one to explain guitar techniques that laypeople like me didn't know."



WHAT DO COMEDY WRITERS KNOW ABOUT GAMES?

Quite a bit, actually, as we discovered when we met a bunch of them to talk stories, scares... and Quadrogogs

It began with a discussion with **Charlie Brooker**, the ex-game journo who now writes for and about television. "You should talk to **Graham Linehan**," he suggested. "He's mad about videogames." So we contacted Linehan. "How about **Simon Pegg**?" said Linehan. "And what about **Peter Serafinowicz**?"

Now, here we are in the centre of London's TV Land off Oxford Street sitting around a table with four men who between them have credits including Father Ted, Nathan Barley, Look Around You and Spaced. The aim? To try to find out what people who earn a crust out of trying to entertain people think of the way videogames try to entertain *them*.

As you might expect with such participants, it turns out to be not *precisely* the kind of discussion you'd typically find within these pages, and unfortunately space constraints mean we aren't able to include some of the more leftfield topics covered on the day (perhaps we can return to Brooker's tremendously inspired game scenarios, in particular, another time), but then that's exactly what we were looking for...





ACTING AND STORIES

Graham, apparently you have some issues with gaming right now.

Graham Linehan: I'm interested in the repetition that keeps coming up in games, and the Blade Runner-esque worlds and so on, and how boring it all is. And also voice acting – Peter was telling me that he found *Fable* literally unplayable because of the voices in it.

Peter Serafinowicz: Yeah, I did. I was really excited about *Fable*. I really liked *The Wind Waker* and my girlfriend and I sat down and thought that *Fable* had that sort of feel to it, but it happened when I bumped into a little kid and his voice was done by a woman – it was like when you see a shit children's show where it's adults doing children's voices. It shattered the experience for me. That was the most extreme example of it, but all the other voice acting in it is so over-the-top. It's creating another world but when you bump into anyone...

GL: You keep getting bounced out of it.

Simon Pegg: I think until recently the whole notion of voice acting has been a bit of an afterthought because it's always been about the technology and the environments and the gameplay, and getting actors in has been: "Well, we'll sort that out afterwards."

GL: I think this is something related to the writing in games, too. It seems to me that most of the people who make games aren't writers and it feels to me that they don't do a lot of reading. When we're talking about voice acting and the dialogue and the scriptwriting of these games, what we're talking about is the very topsoil of the game. Even if the gameplay is fantastic, if the topsoil, the surface, the stuff that you touch, is offputting, the whole game can be ruined. For example, *Prince Of Persia* was a game that failed for me because of its voice acting, which is *awesomely* bad. And, in the sequel, rather than going, "Well, maybe we should sort out this ridiculous man's voice," they went and they decided to ruin the writing of the game in the sense that they turned him into a goth.

Charlie Brooker: They made him all hard.

GL: Yes, they Mad Maxxed it up, and it just lost all of the charm. And I think that if you had someone who knew what they were doing handling the voices for the first *Prince Of Persia*, it would've been so much better.

PS: But also, like you say, it wasn't just the voice, it was... what was it he says when you die?

GL: "Wait – that's not how it happened." Which



NAME: Peter Serafinowicz
CV INCLUDES: Voicing Darth Maul, Spaced (actor), Look Around You (actor, co-writer, co-producer)
GAMING SINCE: 1979
FIRST GAME PLAYED: "I think it was my uncle taking me to an arcade in Liverpool to play *Space War*"
FIRST GAMING SYSTEM: Commodore VIC-20
MOST PLAYED GAME: *TLOZ: The Wind Waker*
CURRENTLY PLAYING: *Lumines*



NAME: Charlie Brooker
CV INCLUDES: TV Go Home (creator, writer), Nathan Barley (creator, co-writer), Spoons (co-writer)
GAMING SINCE: "Christ. Late '70s? I'm guessing here"
FIRST GAME PLAYED: "Either *Space Invaders* or *Circus*"
FIRST GAMING SYSTEM: ZX Spectrum
MOST PLAYED GAME: "Of all time? *Doom* or possibly SNES *Mario Kart*. Or maybe *Bomberman*. Or *Tetris*"
CURRENTLY PLAYING: *Burnout Revenge*



NAME: Graham Linehan
CV INCLUDES: Father Ted (co-creator, co-writer), Black Books (creator, co-writer), The IT Crowd (creator, writer)
GAMING SINCE: "I dunno... 1977?"
FIRST GAME PLAYED: "Probably *Space Invaders*"
FIRST GAMING SYSTEM: "ZX80, I think. Maybe ZX81"
MOST PLAYED GAME: "That's a tough one. Let me put it this way, I didn't want the first *Resident Evil* to end"
CURRENTLY PLAYING: *Burnout Revenge*



NAME: Simon Pegg
CV INCLUDES: Big Train (actor), Spaced (actor, co-writer), Shaun Of The Dead (actor, co-writer)
GAMING SINCE: 1979
FIRST GAME PLAYED: "*Galaxian*, at Gloucester Leisure Centre"
FIRST GAMING SYSTEM: Astro Wars (Grandstand)
MOST PLAYED GAME: *Tetris*
CURRENTLY PLAYING: *Half-Life 2* (multiplayer)





is a great idea. It's another example of what I'm talking about. What a brilliant way of giving you a continue point – it's an example of good writing. But because it's said by this man who every time you hear him you're like, brrr [shivers]... And have you ever played *Max Payne*?

SP: I think *Max Payne* was just a game that was crippled by exposition. You had these chapters and it was like [adopts Max Payne's ridiculous voice], "And then I went in and I saw a girl, she was the kind of girl..." And I'm saying, "All right, come on, I just want to shoot the guy..."

GL: It was the type of game I wanted to play with a pen, so I could write down all the funny lines. He was saying things like – what was it? – "The corners of the abyss were yapping at my heels". The *corners* of the abyss? Who's looking at the corners? If you saw a sketch or a film or anything that began with the words 'The dame walked into the room' you would immediately switch off because it's the most boring, hackneyed kind of device...

SP: Hang on – wait. And then what happened? [Laughter]

MORALITY

GL: It's not very hip to talk about, but there is a moral dimension at play in games nowadays. People complain about *GTA* because you can kill anyone in it, but what I hate is the general feeling of every time you walk by someone they go, [does aggressive *GTA* voice] "*Hey!*" And it's an idea of life that kids are *really* getting into at the moment, which is that it's all about respect. It's the world as a giant playground where everyone is antagonistic. I guess I just hate the easy answer all the time. Another game where I thought the moral dimension came in and created one of the most bizarre gaming experiences – in a bad way – that I've ever seen was the last *Hitman* game, where there's a level set at a party being held by a Russian gangster, and it's in a meat packing place so they're saying, "Oooh, these gangsters are kind of cruel and they have parties near meat..."

SP: Which is ostensibly very bad. [Laughter]

GL: And the gangsters are sitting around and there are strippers dancing for them but because, I don't know, maybe because they would've got an 18 cert or something, the strippers aren't naked. They're wearing head-to-toe rubber gear, including masks. I think this is some very cynical people trying to have their cake and eat it. They're trying to get their game across to kids, so you get this bizarre thing, they have this *bizarre, bizarre* kind of view of human sexuality that's just *bollocks*. No one pays a stripper in bondage gear head to toe, like something out of a SWAT team, to dance in front of them – not even the most perverted gangster does that. And yet it's a view of the world and it's a really confusing and idiotic view of the world that's being put forward through sheer cynicism. With the *Hitman* games, the last one with the sikh temple – that got into a lot of trouble, didn't it? And that's typical of the absolute stupidity of these people. I always just think, y'know, read a newspaper for a few minutes, read a book, get away from the fucking coding for a few minutes and develop a kind of moral sense that'll help you write better.

PS: Future gaming hardware will obviously offer more realistic graphics – do you think that'll make gamemakers more responsible generally?

GL: Funnily enough I think that the responsibility will only increase if the quality of writing gets better. It's an odd situation.

SP: There does seem to be a bit of abandon in gaming, with the *GTA* series and games like Hitman, a slight immoral glee in being able to shoot everybody and run people over and that kind of thing. But in a way it gets more dangerous if it's backed up by good voice talent because then the game becomes more immersive – if that's such a word.

GL: If it's backed up by good voice talent, though, you'll often find that the people who donated the voices will be actors who don't really want to ruin their reputations. So maybe you'd get a situation like you have with films, where you get an actor saying, "I don't want to say this, this is really stupid."

CB: I'm surprised they don't say that, actually, because there's quite a few big names in games nowadays. Samuel L Jackson, for example.

GL: But then again what's Samuel L Jackson going to do? His new film is called Snakes On A Plane. [Laughter]

"It seems to me that most people who make games aren't writers and that they don't do a lot of reading"

WRITING

GL: I think people too often look past all the examples of bad writing in games. Peter, you really enjoyed the last *Resident Evil* game even though some of its writing is bollocks, like: "Writhe in my cage of torment, my friends." It's bollocks but because the game is so beautiful, people look past it.

PS: The story, for me, was great, but with the dialogue I actually think you've got to give them a bit of slack because it's a Japanese translation.

GL: I think what's really missing is a Poetics for games. You know Aristotle's Poetics?

CB: [Puts on upper-class-ponce accent] Yes, I was reading it just the other day... [Laughter]

GL: But these principles, the three-act structure and so on, come from Aristotle. They're basic storytelling things.

SP: Well, there's not a kind of rulebook yet for games. With cinema there are books – Robert McKee, Sid Field and so on.

GL: There are books about game design. I read



one recently, I think I gave it to you, Peter…
PS: Theory Of Fun, yes.
GL: Yes, which was kind of good, but I dunno. It didn't get to the meat of it. I mean, how often have you sat down through a cutscene at the very start of a game and it's said something like "It is the fourth quadrant…" and your brain immediately goes *Dfffvvv…* and shuts down because you don't care. You want to know who's good, who's bad, y'know…
SP: Who you're meant to kill…
GL: It's like the fourth Star Wars film, where the taxation is the first thing you read about. It's like, *Christ.* I loved *Beyond Good & Evil* because in that game you found out things through action.
CB: Like in *Half-Life.*
GL: Yeah. One thing that Aristotle said was that showing is better than telling. So in Casino Joe Pesci doesn't say, "You'd better watch out – I'm a bit of a tough guy," he stabs someone in the eye with a pen, so immediately you know what he's about. So that's a principle that works. In games there are so many things, there's so much fucking exposition. Even in something like *Halo*, I found.
SP: I think they felt a need to give it this sort of narrative weight when in actual fact all you want to do is play it. That's why I love *Half-Life*, particularly *Half-Life 2* – the quality of voice acting in that was excellent.
GL: Here's the moment where I thought *Half-Life 2* in terms of game design was something special and this is an example of showing not telling. Rather than having a big thing at the start saying, [adopts Movie Trailer Man voice] "It is a totalitarian society, men have been relegated to cities known as Quadrogogs," or something, you get off the train and you walk up to a guard and the guard hits a can off the bin and tells you to pick it up. And you begin to learn how the game works, how to pick something up, and drop it, how to put it in the bin, and meanwhile the guard's going, "Heh heh," and immediately you know what this place is like.
CB: I didn't put it in the bin and he punished me.
GL: Well, there you go. It's a fascist society…
PS: You should try to get past that bit. It gets really good.
[Laughter]
SP: And also there's some variation in *Half-Life 2*. In the first one you had essentially two types of scientist, but in the sequel there's some brilliant variation. For example, the guy who gives you the rocket launcher is this big ruddy-faced Englishman. The variation of characters is really beguiling.
CB: And because it doesn't jump out of the engine, there's none of that feeling of hitting a commercial break you get with other games, where you suddenly get to a bit where it goes widescreen for a second.
SP: It's like they feel the need to give it some sort of 'value' to knit it together with some high-falutin' story, when in fact you can get that within the gameplay…
GL: Absolutely, but you can also do it in the way *GTA* does it, and it seems that the voice acting and all the bad dialogue doesn't seem to damage



its sales at all, it doesn't seem to matter. A point I want to make is that games are a very young medium, and generally as an artform they're not taken seriously, and they're not really respected and it's because so many people are willing to just make do with things. And with Rockstar, they've already done it with the voice acting, but if they got a writer to come in and just do a pass over all that stuff, or a team of writers to get together to write stuff that's *actually* funny, people will be searching the game for new bits, they'll get in the car and drive around the block for hours not committing any crimes just listening to the radio.

But people do that already. A lot of the people who play the *GTA* games think that they're very funny.

GL: My point is, those are people who are already playing games, but I'm talking about getting *everyone* playing games, and I think there are lots of people who would see a videogame and see absolutely no value in it, whereas I think they're wonderful.

SP: I think writers and actors need to be convinced that it's a viable format as well, though. Now and again, as an actor, I've been asked to do videogames and I've asked what it is and it's something about some soldiers...

GL: In the future...

SP: Exactly. In a Quadrogog gone bad.

[Laughter]

SP: And it's like: oh. But it could become another arena for actors to work in. Just as we do voiceovers for radio and so on, it could be a very fulfilling, fun thing to do, but right now on games you've got some of the designers doing some of the voices and so on. Again, with *Half-Life 2* you get people who are actually doing characterisations and you think, yes, this is great, I'm actually getting involved in this.

OK, so what would someone from the videogame world have to say to you to get you onboard?

GL: Big payment at the other end.

[Laughter]

GL: But at the *other end*. Because I would say most actors, because they have so little respect for games, get paid upfront a huge amount. But if someone came in and explained the idea and sold it the way Peter Molyneux can sell an idea, you'd say yeah, I'll do it cheaply and you give me a reward if it does well.

HUMOUR (AND BOSSES AND ZOMBIES)

CB: What about funny games? Can you think of any that really work?

PS: *Sam & Max*. I remember when I first played it: you have that thing where you click everything, and you keep trying to pick up the phone and the cursor won't change to 'Use' so you keep trying and it goes, [American accent] "No, you can't do that," and you do it again and it says, "I told you before..." and there are like ten of those different responses, ending with, "I really wish this game were over." I remember thinking that was so brilliant.

GL: It's a very clever way of keeping you interested during what's usually a very frustrating part of a point-and-click adventure.

There have been some amusing point-and-click adventure games. Do you think that's because the environment lends itself to humour, whereas more action-oriented game environments perhaps don't?

GL: Actually, I think that there should be humour in everything. I'll give you an example. There's a bit in Die Hard where he's at an elevator shaft and he does this completely ridiculous thing where he has to leap down and across into a side vent below – it's heartstopping, really great. And suddenly he's in this very claustrophobic space and he lights a lighter and says, "Come out to the coast, we'll have a few laughs," and there was a huge laugh in the cinema because it was a moment of absolute high adventure followed but a kind of... [sighs]. Why don't games have things like this? I was playing *God Of War* the other night and there's a bit towards the end where he walks out into this huge level and there are conveyor belts going this way and that way and huge grinders at the side of each conveyor belt and you walk forwards and the entrance immediately closes behind you and millions of enemies come out – that's the kind of moment where you'd like a character to go [rolls eyes], but instead he's all: "Rargh!" Never gets tired. Why not introduce a little bit of realism into some of these games?

"Games aren't really respected and it's because so many people are willing to just make do with things"

CB: I'd like to see a moment a bit like the big laugh in Raiders Of The Lost Ark where the guy comes out with the elaborate sword moves and Indiana Jones just shoots him.

SP: Wouldn't it be great to kill a boss with one shot?

GL: Exactly. And I think this has been written about in **Edge** a fair bit: boss exhaustion, where you don't go, "Great, look at this thing," you go, [sighs] "Christ." Why not give the people at home a bit of a treat by having, I don't know, as a bad example, a war elephant coming out and you throw a mouse and the elephant turns around and runs out?

The problem is that developers spend so much time and money making their war elephants that they want to make sure they're up there on the screen to be seen.

GL: I realise that. But that's almost kind of the point. If they did actually try something different it'd be more impressive.

Despite games being such a young medium, there are so many established conventions in game design, and breaking free of them will always meet with resistance, sadly.

GL: I think that's why games will not take that next step they need to take.
SP: Maybe there's a way to do both. You can have the boss battle you can see through to the end or there's a little way that through sheer guile you can work out how to scare it off or run around the back.
GL: It could always come back in a later scene when you don't have a mouse.
CB: Coming back to that line in Die Hard, wouldn't it be better if they got a writer to sit down and play through a game and work out lines for specific bits? So you might only hear 18 lines in the whole game but if they're well placed and they're funny, that's better than a random wisecrack.
GL: And the wisecracks are always these toughguy 16-year-old things that they think are cool...
CB: There are some quite funny ones in *Halo 2*, actually. I think it's David Cross from Mr Show, just making some quite funny, sarcy comments. He voices some of the random soldiers – you can go up to one and take a weapon off him, and he'll go, "That's right, he wanted *my* gun." It's funny because it's undercutting what's quite a seriously themed game.
PS: That is good, although I'm not mad on the game, I didn't like the aliens.
GL: I figured out what I don't like about *Halo*: I feel like a bully when I'm playing it. There are all these little midget things coming at you, with squeaky voices. Give me someone I can shoot who's threatening.
CB: They are quite nasty, though.
SP: The bigger ones are nasty.
PS: The bigger ones are just the big ones you've seen in one billion other games.
GL: Exactly. I hate them, I hate the way that there kind of amorphous, you can't really see what shape they are, what the design is actually like. I did enjoy the first *Halo*, but remember the first *Half-Life*? I felt that was most fun when you were shooting people.
CB: It's like with the *Resident Evil* games – I prefer it when it's zombies to when, halfway through, they start becoming big creatures. Then I lose interest a bit.

PACING (AND SCARES)

SP: I've played games where they've just tried my patience so much that I've not gone any further. I had that in the middle of *Halo 2* – something happened that I couldn't get past after three tries and it wasn't engaging me enough for me to want to continue.
GL: I think that's quite a common thing amongst people like us – as soon as a game comes out, we buy it, we play it for a while, get a feel for the kind of game it is, and then get bored with it and throw it away. It's another reason why the topsoil is really important. It's like in any blockbuster movie: the opening scene has to have a real hook to pull you in. A lot of games don't have those hooks – you just see them and go, "OK, it's another one of those sorts of games." *God Of War* isn't like that, *God Of War* has some moments that are just breathtaking.
How do you feel about films that don't open with bangs?
GL: It depends on the type of film. If it's a blockbuster I want an opening scene that makes you go, "Whoah."
PS: We just saw Kung Fu Hustle and the beginning, oh my god, it's amazing. It's the best beginning of a film I've seen for ages.
GL: The opening of Kung Fu Hustle is great because what it's doing is completely overturning your expectations, moment to moment. I'd love to see a game that does what Psycho does, where you'd have the lead character being killed ten minutes into the game. What a shock that would be.
PS: That happened to me when I played *Pac-Man*.
[Laughter]
PS: That was a big moment for me.
GL: "What? They've killed the main character?"
SP: I think it's because there's so much competition vying for top billing in the game charts that people are afraid to take risks and they want to just get straight to the point, have the action very wham-bam. But there are games that prove that that's not necessarily what we want, games where you do have to think and you are challenged and your expectations are overturned and those are the games that really become classics.

"I'd love to see a game do what Psycho does, where you'd have the lead character being killed ten minutes into it"

CB: It's strange that you don't get games like *Skool Daze* and *Back 2 Skool* nowadays. Just the fact that you could rename all the teachers after teachers at your school, and all the characters after friends at school. And you could write on the blackboards. You could write: PISS.
[Laughter. Conversation spirals off into discussion about rude graffiti]
PS: I know this is all a bit scattershot but you know *Serious Sam*? Talking about frightening moments in games, there was a bit where you're in this wide-open space and you think: what am I supposed to do now? And then you hear "Aaaargh" and you look and there's a guy running towards you and his head is a bomb. And you're thinking: how is he screaming? And then there are loads of them so you hear a chorus of these "Aaaargh"s and that is funny.
SP: I like games where they just chill you. There are certain classic moments in good games in the *Resident Evil* mode, like in *Silent Hill* when those little pig-womble things come at you in the dark...
GL: When the snakes drop on you in the first *Resident Evil*.
SP: Also, audio elements, like the screaming from



a distance, is a great idea, or the bad guys in *Half-Life 2* who go, "Oooh, I hate you."
[Laughter]
GL: I don't think that some of the things we're talking about are actually arty-farty ideas, I'm purely talking about entertainment value, things that would make people sit up and listen. I am a little bit sick of... I mean, Charlie and I were at a party recently and I started talking about games to some people and I realised about halfway through the conversation: they think I'm sort of retarded. Because I was talking about *The Sims* and how engrossing it is and it just wasn't connecting. I'd love to get someone like that and put them down in front of the first *Silent Hill* and have them play it and at the end of it they'd be like, "I see what games can be like, I see what games can put you through." At the moment, the topsoil, as I say, the first thing that the casual observer notices about games, is so adolescent, so male, so boring, so hackneyed, that it's no wonder they're misunderstood.

GIRLS (AND WRITING, AGAIN)

CB: It's hard to get your girlfriend to play games, I find. There are certain games my girlfriend will get obsessed about, like *Burnout*, which she'll play all night, but if I showed her *God Of War* she'd probably go [rolls eyes].
PS: My girlfriend and I played *Wind Waker* together all he way through and we've played through all the new *Resident Evils*, *Ico*...
GL: Even the latest *Resident Evil*? My wife hated the latest one, because suddenly the puzzle element was just gone. I mean, if you're fighting the guy with the knife for about the 200th time, well, I don't think any girl will put up with that.
CB: I don't like having to fiddle about going and getting the blue key.
GL: I actually like that stuff. But I do think another thing that is holding games back is the fact that so few games speak to women. There's 50 per cent of your potential audience being more of less neglected right there.
SP: What about that game... *Harvest Moon*?
PS: My girlfriend was nuts about *Harvest Moon*. I remember watching her playing that game and seeing that blank male expression on her face. I actually took a photo of her and said: "You've been playing that for six hours now." I thought: brilliant.
SP: Wasn't it a farming game, with gardening and stuff?
GL: Yes.
SP: What was the topsoil like?
[Laughter]
GL: You get enough money to buy a pond and when you buy a pond you can buy ducks and so on, so for women it's like crack.
Funnily enough, the games you're talking about, the ones that girls seem to really like, have one thing in particular in common: they're all just really good games.
PS: It's an interesting point.
SP: It's the difference I suppose between a Michael Bay movie and a Stanley Kubrick film: loads of people will eat up Bad Boys II and it'll



make loads of money, but less commercial but much better films don't get such a big audience.
GL: But I think a woman would be more interested in seeing a good Kubrick film than Bad Boys II.
SP: Oh yeah, I'm not talking in terms of gender split, I'm talking generally about the amount of people who will consume something that's less cerebral, because we as people – all of us included – everybody, would always go for the thing that's slightly easier. We have to be forced to be challenged and when we are challenged we enjoy it, but there has to be that moment when someone says, look, just sit down and play this and you will like it, or sit down and watch this.
GL: Mmm, again, this goes back to writing, because this is something that good writing can do. At the start of *Max Payne*, if there was a good joke or a moment in a cutscene that was startling in some way, you'd go, well, this looks like just walking around shooting things but I'm going to see if there's more to it.
CB: I did quite like *Max Payne* for its style.
PS: I liked the kind of sub-Chandler dialogue.
GL: [In disbelief] What?
CB: I thought it was deliberately bad.
GL: No, no, I bet you that that's them writing at the peak of their ability.
PS: Oooh, you snob, you.
[Laughter]
PS: The thing about *Max Payne* also made me not like the *Metal Gear Solid* games. I know it's like a common complaint of those games, but there are endless conversations, endless, endless, endless cutscenes...
GL: With *Splinter Cell*, also, I liked the first game but as it went on it's another example of news reports: 'The people of Espanistan are invading the country of Naktuda', and you're like: whose side am I supposed to be on?
PS: That thing with *Splinter Cell* as well: [adopts super-gruff, staccato tone] "The main character's voice, every sentence he speaks sounds like this..."
CB: Isn't it Michael Ironside?
PS: Whoever it is, I don't care who it is, it's just annoying.
You tell him to change it.
PS: Yeah? I fucking will!
[Laughter]
GL: I think the question is asked too much among game designers: what will a 16-year-old find cool? And the answer is always the same thing, the same thing that they always find cool...
SP: Women in rubber suits dancing near meat.
[Laughter]
GL: But, y'know, why isn't the question what *might* they find cool? What *might* we do that's different that they might find cool?
SP: But without sounding too over-the-top, that's a question that's applied throughout every medium when art has to be entertainment. That's always a part of it: who's it aimed at? Are they going to like it? Will they find it cool? Will it sell? And that's what makes things bland.


I/O
Nintendo
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Making waves

If not Nintendo, then who? If not now, then when? The Revolution's remarkable motion-sensitive controller moves gaming from next-gen to all-gen



The Tokyo Game Show is not an event of whoops and hollers. A keynote here requires a suit and some PowerPoint, not a pounding soundtrack and flashing lights. Audience reaction ranges from restrained applause, if they've heard things that trouble them, to intense applause if they've heard things that excite them. And yet, sitting down with Nintendo president **Satoru Iwata** later in the day on which he unveiled the Revolution controller, it's clear he's still buzzing – more like he's come off stage at Madison Square Gardens than the Makuhari Messe Convention Centre. He cannot stop grinning.

And he has cause. TGS is alive with talk of the Revolution. The week before the event had been dominated with speculation, the internet overloaded with increasingly preposterous mock-ups. Once revealed, it changed everyone's vocabulary. No more 'good to see you's and 'hajimemashite's but instead a new universal greeting: 'Did you see it? Have you played it? Will it work?' A few weeks on, those questions are still resonating, but for those who've had a chance to experience the new controller, the answers come instantly: Yes, yes and yes.

Sitting down with **Shigeru Miyamoto** the day before the Revolution's revelation, the atmosphere is very different. There's a huge sense of energy and enthusiasm, but it's fuelled as much by nerves as confidence. There are less than 24 hours to go before the controller is unveiled, but marketing executives stand in hushed huddles in the corners of the demo room, still trying to settle on the best way to communicate what this incredibly unassuming device will mean for gaming. There's no pomp or circumstance, just a white-clothed trestle table laid out with Revolutions, and half a dozen TVs waiting to





reveal what it can do. Nor is there much in the way of preamble, and nothing at all in the way of technical explanations. It rapidly becomes apparent that there's something a little Zen about Nintendo's new controller: the best way to explain it is not to explain it at all.

The first thing that doesn't need any explaining is the design. The TV-remote-control looks are a shock, but the universal approachability that this familiarity brings is instantly apparent. Compared to the trident prongs of an N64 pad or the button overload of a DualShock, this is simplicity itself. Unthreatening and uncomplicated, it begs to be picked up. And when it is, it's almost impossible to put down. Light and comfortable, your index finger settles snugly into the crook in the underside, poising your thumb neatly over the main action button. There's a soft, rubbery finish on both those surfaces, meaning that although the handset looks hard, sharp-edged and slippery, the sensation of holding it is effortless – just grippy enough that you can almost entirely relax your hold. And then you point it at a television and start to laugh.

Compared to an N64 pad or DualShock, this is simplicity itself. Unthreatening and uncomplicated, it begs to be picked up

The simplest demo is a twoplayer block-shooting game. A red reticle for you, a blue reticle for him. Point and squirt. This should not be amusing. Even the technology shouldn't impress: although the Revolution's principles are rather different, anyone who's ever played *Point Blank* has pointed something at a screen and made shapes go pop. But that something is the difference. Novelty peripherals have always felt like faff – cables and calibration getting in the way of your fun. This controller makes you feel like a magician, becoming so settled in your hand there might as well be nothing there. You think it, and it happens. And as a consequence, within seconds everyone has forgotten this is supposed to be a tech demo. Instead, the focus becomes the score and the burgeoning grudge matches that develop as you toss the controller from person to person. And by then everyone is laughing.

But while the Revolution controller's ability to act like a laser pointer – a giant, invisible stylus that turns your TV into a big DS – is accessible, immediate fun, its full spatial potential is rather more sobering. As well as acting like a pointer, the Revolution can also sense depth (as you move the controller toward and away from the screen) and angle (as you tilt the controller left and right). It makes it instantly apparent how much of a cheap fudge the 3D contro of the last two generations has been. This is real space, and stopping to think about it starts to tie your brain in knots.

Happily, it's another thing that doesn't require any explanation. Instead, it requires the introductio of a bright red biplane into the deserted streets of *Mario Sunshine*'s Delfino Plaza. On being handed the controller, you're handed control of the plane. And then, whatever you want the plane to do, you do to the controller. Tilt it down and the plane swoops into a dive. Point it left and the plane starts a wide curve. Point it left *and* tilt it left and you produce a tight, banked turn. Controlling it is light, instinctive and precise. And it makes you laugh, again. The controller isn't a clumsy compromise: it's fast and sensitive. Although the understandable anxieties still exist that using it will feel like wrestling a gummed-up ball mouse, the sensation is more like swooping a high-res optical mouse across a decent mat. If anything, it's too quick, too precise.

That said, precision is something you can never have enough of in the likes of *Kuru Kuru Kururin*. Adapted for the Revolution as a twoplayer race, it's a simple matter of pointing at your helicopter craft and directing it where you want it to be, with no one to blame but yourself when it thumps into walls and grinds through gaps. There's an initial urge to stick your arm out toward the screen and make your moves with the exaggeration of a military band conductor, but it soon becomes clear that the best results come through relaxed flicks of the wrist. Although the idea of a controller which has to be in constant motion brings with it concerns of gaming becoming as exhausting as a few rounds with an EyeToy or *Donkey Konga*'s bongos, there's no immediate reason to believe that playing with Revolution will need to be any more tiring than playing with a mouse: rest your arm on your knee or sofa arm, and direct the action with gentle tilts and turns. Everyone, it should be said, is still laughing. And whooping and gasping and hooting as *Kuru* experts slice through the level in a display of brave brinksmanship and *Kuru* novices stare in hypnotised





MAGIC BOX

Nintendo has simply refused to comment on all and any aspect of the Revolution controller technology, so it's impossible at this stage to do more than speculate on how it might work. What's clear is that the motion detection hinges on two tiny sensors which are plugged into the main unit itself. These will be supplied out of the box mounted on to a thin metal spacer – the whole unit is about a foot long, and perhaps a centimetre deep and half a centimetre high. This can be placed on top of the television, or below it, or on top of a media centre – anywhere, it would seem, so long as it's aligned with the screen. Dedicated players can even dismount the sensors from the spacer and stick them directly to either side of the TV. What this means that if you're in a position where viewing the screen is comfortable, the Revolution will be able to accurately detect movement with no calibration.



POWER BUTTON

As shown in the energetic demo video shown at TGS – and included on this month's DVD – the power button simply shuts down the whole Revolution system. Anyone with a chipped Xbox can testify to how welcome this tiny feature is

TRANSMITTER

There's no confirmation at all on how the Revolution controller works, but it's clear during the demo that placing a hand over the transmitter impedes its function. It's entirely possible that the machine relies on propriety broadcast technology: only time – and a press release from Nintendo – will tell

BATTERY

As of yet, there's no information about how the Revolution controllers are to be powered. It's entirely possible that they can be trickle charged from the main unit via an included cable, but it's also conceivable that the unit will simply run from ordinary batteries. However, since there's a rumble function included in the controller, it will hopefully prove to be the former, not the latter

D-PAD

Again featuring the grippy, soft rubber finish, the D-pad feels clean and responsive. It's a key issue, as while for Sony and Microsoft's machines the D-pad has mostly become a selection tool rather than a movement tool, the availability of so many old titles on the Revolution means it's likely to see a lot of use

DESIGN

Miyamoto and Iwata were at pains to point out that the controller design isn't 100 per cent finalised. Indeed, the versions available for the demonstrations differed in small details such as the labelling and finish of their buttons. However, the overall look of the controller has been finalised

HOME BUTTON

Nintendo is saying nothing about the function of this button so far, but it seems reasonable to assume that it will work a little like the 360's home button, returning you to the dashboard from within any game. Neither the Home nor Start and Select buttons are useful for gameplay – being too fiddly and having little feel: while the *Metroid Prime* demo is forced to use them, hopefully no Revolution-designed game will take advantage

CHANNELS

Throughout the demonstration, the Revolution lived up to Nintendo's promise of no calibration. Each main unit (or devkit – hidden under the tablecloth in every case) picked up the handsets perfectly, and there was no hint of interference between them

EXPANSION PORT

Nintendo suggests that, as well as the nunchuck controller, the expansion port could be used to convert the handset into a traditional controller, as well as allowing for the use of peripherals such as dance mats and bongos. It sounds a little like a compromise – wouldn't you rather just plug a dance mat into the main machine? – but it certainly adds flexibility

GAME BUTTONS

The A and B buttons aren't reachable when the unit is held like a remote control. Instead, they are designed for when it is held horizontally like an NES pad. However, with only two buttons available in that orientation, few of the downloadable games beyond the 8bit era will be playable on the default controller

horror at the apparent rotational impossibility of coaxing their ship forward. No matter how hard you try to concentrate your attention on the radical new piece of hardware in your hand, it slips off it on to what's happening on screen. It may have surprised everyone with its looks, but Nintendo's intention was to design a controller that turned invisible as soon as it slips into your hand, and – so far – that's exactly what it has done.

There are other demos – basketball games and a rather boring Pokémon version of *Where's Wally* – but the important finale is *Metroid Prime 2: Echoes*. Everything else so far has been a novelty: a minigame or a multiplayer distraction. This is a real game – something that will be able to absorb one person's attention for hours at a time, which offers variation and requires skilled play. And all at once, the Revolution isn't enough. Miyamoto unveils the 'nunchuck controller', the analogue-stick add-on which connects to the base of the Revolution controller and sits in your free hand. ('Why isn't it wireless?' we ask. "Because," laughs Miyamoto, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world, "if it was we wouldn't be able to call it the nunchuck controller.") The thinking behind it is clear – this is to accommodate what gamers expect games to be. It's almost certain to be bundled with the machine from launch, and instantly amplifies the controller's possibilities. And does *Metroid* work? Of course it does: the pointer controls your aim, the stick your movement, and we've known for years that this is a combination that works. Is it a revelation? Not really. It's an odd moment when Nintendo's heritage of controller innovation acts against it. Everything about *Metroid Prime* was configured to adapt



traditional firstperson combat to a non-traditional controller, and that legacy undermines its ability to showcase the Revolution's firstperson potential. Resisting the urge to lock-on and reminding yoursel not to reach for the missile or weapon-change buttons that are no longer there is the first time tha playing with the Revolution doesn't feel instinctive. The demo is clearly designed to reassure hardcore gamers that hardcore games will still be playable, but the fudging of *Metroid*'s distinctive controls has rather the opposite effect.

Nevertheless, the message is clear. The combination controller is comfortable and adds dizzyingly to the potential control configurations that the Revolution will offer. It doesn't just replicat twin-stick movement, although it does that neatly enough: that second stick can now also sense distance and tilt. Movement maps will never be the same again – who knows how things like dodging, ducking and leaning could now be implemented? Aiming is also an entirely new process, bringing the speed and agility of a PC FPS to the television for th first time. The thought of a firstperson game designed as lovingly round the Revolution controlle as *Metroid* was around the GameCube's is dazzling.

Returning to TGS's showfloor after the demo is a faintly surreal process. Suddenly, the 360 looks incredibly old-fashioned. Picking up a DualShock for a quick play of *Rogue Galaxy* seems preposterous. Two sticks, 16 buttons, dozens of commands? Is this really the future? And that, precisely, is Iwata's argument. Two years ago, when he first spoke up at TGS about his concerns that gaming was investing ruinously enormous sums of money in an evolutionary dead-end – hyper-realistic, complex an demanding games which catered only to the tastes



THE REVOLUTIONARY HANDBOOK

Details are skill sketchy about the Revolution, but here's what's known so far. As well as being infamously about the same size as three DVD cases (Nintendo is yet to announce its weight in paperclips), it will come in a variety of colours (actual hues to be confirmed), and uses an IBM CPU codenamed 'Broadway' (rumoured to be a customised 2.5GHz PowerPC) and an ATI GPU codenamed 'Hollywood'. The unit will run both 12cm optical disks – although what format is as yet unknown – as well as GameCube disks, via a slot-loading drive. DVD playback will be available via a 'self-contained attachment', presumably some kind of dongle. It's not yet known if Revolution will support high-def – reports suggest the GPU could output at a high enough resolution, but it's not clear if Nintendo would deem it desirable in terms of the kinds of games it wants Revolution to produce, or if the disk format would have the capacity to support the necessary assets. What is confirmed is that games from Nintendo's back catalogue – from NES to N64 – will be downloadable (although nothing is known about pricing or payment systems), and that the Revolution will be wifi enabled, which would allow for DS demos to be downloaded and then beamed to the handheld. As well as the wireless Revolution controller, the main unit has four controller ports, which will almost certainly accept GameCube joypads. The unit has two memory card slots, as well as both internal flash memory and a bay for additional flash memory, although little is yet known about how this might be used.





of existing gamers – his stance sounded like the politics of convenience. Nintendo, slipping into third place in the home console race and apparently without Sony and Microsoft's willingness to spend, had little choice but to claim that the cutting edge of the spec war was no longer where it wanted to be. What other option was there but a face-saving rationale for the inevitable marginalisation that seemed certain to await the company?

But this time, when Iwata took the stage, the context had changed. The 360's key architect, J Allard, had since made it clear that he doesn't believe that gaming as it is now can attract many more people than it already does; the 360's communications abilities overtly target the massmarket that will never use the console for playing 'full' games. And the head-to-head between the new handhelds has revealed that while the PSP, by offering PS2-style gaming on the go, is a technical marvel, it's also mostly cannibalising Sony's existing market. Iwata's figures show that the DS – which has outperformed nearly everyone's expectations, at home and abroad – is bringing in new gamers – the old, the very young, the female and the sceptical.

Iwata's vision was borne out of the slowdown of the videogame industry in Japan, but is it now applicable worldwide? "Well, I believe that it's in Japan that what I'm trying to say can be really easily understood, because what we call 'gamer drift' has become very obvious," he explains. "And, as far as the west goes, I know we don't yet see any shrinking of the market, but then you have to ask: do you think you can sustain that growth forever? What I'm speculating is that maybe there's a risk there already, and maybe it's just not yet as noticeable in the west as it is in Japan. When it comes to having the time and energy to play videogames, those are always limited for every person – wherever they are in the world. And it's also a fact that the gap between veteran and novice players is widening all round the world. So these two things are not confined to the Japanese market, although their impact may reveal itself differently in the west."

Two years on, the Revolution is the fruit of that speculation, and no one can fault it for not being radical enough. But while the most obvious sign is its input device, the Revolution's real innovations are less obvious. It's a machine that entirely abdicates from the spec war, the one thing that has never previously been possible in videogaming. It's a timely moment to do it, no question. At TGS, with the next generation only months away, the 360 and PS3 games on show looked, at worst, not far off the cream of current-gen games or, at best, like the better examples of current-gen cutscenes. Either way, there is nothing on show you haven't seen before, even if there are things you haven't *played* before. It seems that the wow factor alone can no longer be relied upon to bring in new gamers.

And for Nintendo, already the only platform holder which expects hardware to make money from the off, it offers even greater profitability at even cheaper prices for consumers. Although there isn't yet any official discussion, let alone any official confirmation, on pricing, there are good reasons to assume the Revolution will be an inexpensive console from launch. While Kutaragi warns PlayStation fans – as well as presumably Sony's own financiers – that they'll have to reach deep into their pockets to find the price of a PS3, Nintendo has a solution which saves both it and its audience money. Of course, the price it pays is that the Revolution itself may well offer little more than a souped-up GameCube. But is that such a bad concept?

It must be an alluring prospect for developers. Iwata makes it very clear that developing for Revolution will be a very familiar process: "The Revolution version of *Metroid Prime 2* you played, that took just three weeks to port, with – since it was a highly confidential project – a very small team. It is pretty much that easy for those who have worked on the GC to make the new Revolution software. As a matter of fact even before they received a basic chipset for the Revolution, developers have been able to start work on their projects by working on GameCube development kits, and then upgrade to Revolution when it became available." The power of 360 and PS3 present phenomenal opportunities for gaming, but the challenge of fully exploiting them is something developers are only beginning to cut their multi-threaded teeth on. The GameCube, by comparison, has long been lauded as being a pleasure to work with, and the chance to build on that expertise rather than jettison it after five years must surely be appealing. The downturn in the GC's fortunes means that we're yet to see all that it is capable of – the prospect of watching an updated version stretch its legs for another five years is certainly intriguing.

"Developers have been able to start work on GameCube devkits, and then upgrade to Revolution when it became available"





CUTE-ING EDGE

Once the function of the Revolution was decided – to make gaming accessible to everyone again – the task became one of packaging that function. How did the look of the console come about? "We could have come up with any kind of shape in terms of the design," laughs Iwata (above). "We looked at ordinary ideas that required finger actions and we wondered about if it would be a good idea to have an LCD screen – or how about a touch panel? There was even something that looked a bit like a flying disk, I remember. We tried everything!" What about the styling? Isn't it a little severe for something supposed to be so massmarket? "Well, whenever you are thinking about purchasing some new hardware or a new gadget there is always a selection of cool-looking products – edgy products – and of cute products. But perhaps sometimes you want to avoid the cute-looking gadget if it's for something that's going to be in your living room for everyone to see. But you never have any hesitation for something that's cool looking."

MOCK AND AWE

At E3 2005, Nintendo's tactic of showing the main Revolution box but not the controller, or indeed any software, seemed ill-advised and not a little desperate. By the eve of TGS, however, it was clear that the longterm impact of the company's PR policy was much more successful. Speculation on the form of the new controller was feverish, and dozens upon dozens of mock-ups, from the plausible to the preposterous, swept across forums and fansites. Here's a small sample (the rest are collated at www.4colorrebellion.com/revolution-controller-mockups).



And, more importantly, it means development time can be focused on making the most of the Revolution's unique capabilities, rather than on the nuts and bolts of making things move onscreen.

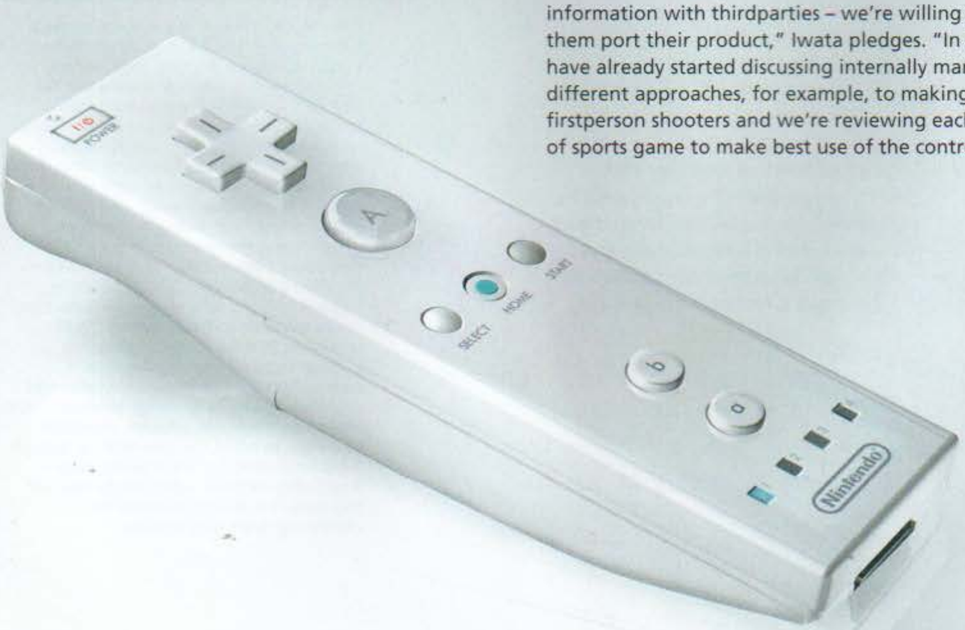
But what will those games be? And who will be making them? Nintendo hasn't confirmed any projects as yet, but Iwata is willing to state that 75 per cent of the company's internal teams are working on either Revolution or DS games. High-profile developers like Molyneux and Kojima have spoken out for it in glowing terms. And for thirdparties put off by the prospect of having to reinvent the wheel before they even begin, there are two options. The first is not to reinvent anything at all. The Revolution is compatible with GameCube controllers, and Nintendo is also promising a dedicated 'classic' controller, which the Revolution handset will slot into, giving the best of both worlds. So, if your game idea does need two sticks and a dozen buttons, there's no reason why it can't have them. Or, if you do want to dive into the new possibilities, Nintendo is willing to put in the work to revolutionise your ideas.

"At Nintendo what we are doing is developing the knowledge and technology and knowhow to use this new controller, and then we can share this information with thirdparties – we're willing to help them port their product," Iwata pledges. "In fact, we have already started discussing internally many different approaches, for example, to making great firstperson shooters and we're reviewing each kind of sports game to make best use of the controller, and we'll share that knowhow with thirdparty developers or publishers."

Iwata is willing to state that 75 per cent of the company's internal teams are working on either Revolution or DS games

Indeed, before your imagination takes you on to what the Revolution's real revolutions will be, you hit an unlikely anomaly. The most obviously portable games are the types that have so far been the most unhappy on home consoles: fastpaced FPSes, space combat epics, menu-heavy strategy games. And, interestingly, they're the games furthest away from Nintendo's heartland of puzzles, platforms and adventures. But beyond conventional console games, and newly accessible PC-style games, the real excitement comes from the games not yet imagined. There are a thousand idle daydreams to be had about how this game or that game could work on Revolution, but there seems every likelihood that the machine's standout games will be inconceivable to everyone but the person who first thinks them up. And, with familiar and manageable architecture in place, there's no reason why development won't be swift and cheap.

There are concerns, of course. For a console whose purpose is to simplify gaming, won't the existence of three (or more) control types confuse its market? Will there be logos on the back of the game box to say if a game is Revolution controlled, or classic controlled, or suitable for use with existing controllers? Will there be a rash of lazy bodges – ports of games designed around conventional controllers with motion sensing added as a clumsy afterthought? The DS has given us a number of those – although not as many as was first feared – but the fact that games unsuitable for the Revolution controller can simply be played using a conventional one allays that fear somewhat. But will there be ports at all? With the likely performance gulf between Revolution and 360/PS3, will it be appealing, or even practical, for studios to retool all their high-def assets to run on the lowlier machine? Will the Revolution suffer from a drought of

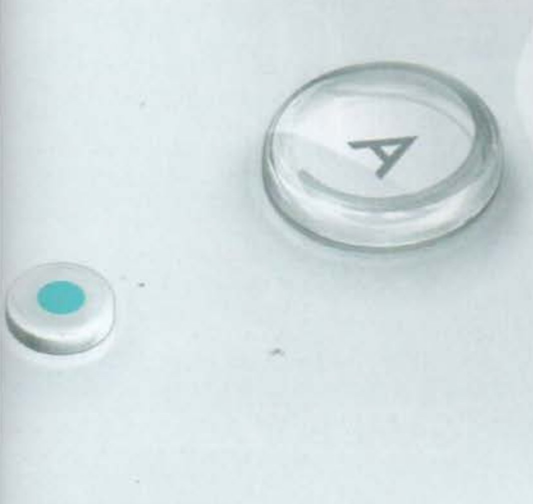




thirdparty support as badly as the GameCube currently does? And, perhaps more crucially, will it matter if it does?

Iwata is very coy about his console's name: "It is still a codename, and we really want to announce the final product name as soon as possible because the longer it takes the more people believe it's called the Revolution. And because the controller has had to be very impactful I know that many people already want us to name it Revolution!" Why, it's almost as if they planned it that way. But for all its hyperbolic overtones, it wouldn't be an unsuitable name. It's not simply that it's a radical step – a controller that looks like a TV remote, a console whose specs are irrelevant, a financial model which is palatable for manufacturer, publisher and consumer, a new wave of game styles, a new stability for development processes – it's that it's a true revolution. The is the Nintendo of the NES and of GB *Tetris* coming full circle, believing that the whole world wants to play, it's just that it doesn't know how. Iwata is unapologetic about his conviction: "Our ambition it to satisfy people's need to be happy, through our software. People want to play because human beings want to be human beings – and we are the only species on earth that loves to play." And if that is the manifesto behind the new controller's design, Nintendo has already accomplished its revolution. It's impossible to fault it in terms of its accessibility, immediacy and inherent ability to enchant. But that's only the first of three crucial hurdles. Next comes delivering the software which successfully exploits that hardware. Then comes finding and sustaining a market. With Nintendo's pedigree, it would take a brave man to doubt the company's ability to accomplish the second. The third? Watch this space.



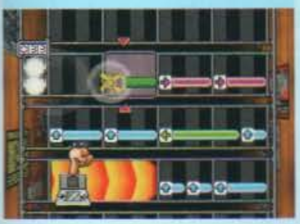


Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing

Daigasso! Band Brothers



It's rare for it to be more than a foot away from the DS's cart slot, but the new GBA cart song pack has reinstated it as a firm – if even more challenging – favourite.
DS, NINTENDO

Denki Blocks



There's no pocket too small for a Micro and no spare moment too short for a quick squidge of Denki's blockbuster. Even from memory the best puzzles are hugely satisfying.
GBA, RAGE

Hot Shots Golf: Open Tee



It doesn't have analogue swing, create-a-face or EA Trax. But who needs those when you've got perfected club mechanics and enough charm to ensnare a tiger?
PSP, SCEA

When in roam
The peculiar slavery of freedom



CJ may be able to come and go as he pleases, but is his gameworld always the kind of place you'd want to be when it comes to sheer fun?

There's something about *GTA: San Andreas* that few of its imitators seem to understand. It's a self-defence mechanism tucked away in the game, perhaps more invisibly than any recently removed coffee stains, but it's in there: *San Andreas* is a game so self-fulfilling in terms of its *Vice City* heritage that, among all the parachuting, horse racing and gang wars, it manages to satisfy the player's *GTA* hunger so well as to pretty much neutralise it. *SA* has a good chance of making people so jaded with the *GTA* template as to make any similar games seem triply dull if they fail to offer any truly new ideas or scope.

On the evidence of the past few years – see *Destroy All Humans*, *Mercenaries*, *Spider-Man 2* and *True Crime* – as gameworlds get bigger, so their focus shrinks, and there has to come a point where it begins to feel shrivelled to the point of atrophy. It's something that *San Andreas* veered close to at times, but never got snagged upon – square mile after square mile of virtual real estate, and so relatively little to do. It's as if these cities are actually videogames' suburbia.

Both *Ultimate Spider-Man* and *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* are arguably done a disservice by being so seemingly content that their worlds simply exist rather than doing anything interesting with them. *Jak X*, on the other hand, is a game that has reeled in some of the inconsequential expanses of *Jak 3* to provide something far more focused, and feels more enjoyably immediate for it. *THAW* and *Ultimate Spider-Man* even go as far as to challenge the definition of 'free-roaming' by forcing players to complete side-missions in between episodes of their main stories; it feels like artificial lengthening because it so patently is. Freedom may come at a price, but there's no need for a council tax too.

Great pains are being taken to create these worlds – actual worlds, not glorified corridors – all too often with no great pleasures to be found within them. In six milestones, God created the world, and a sizeable, streaming one at that; on the seventh, he rested and threw in some courier missions and several hundred hidden tokens. Even if a publisher or developer steadfastly and truthfully maintains that it hasn't taken 'inspiration' from *San Andreas*, it should definitely take heed.





Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



QUAKE 4

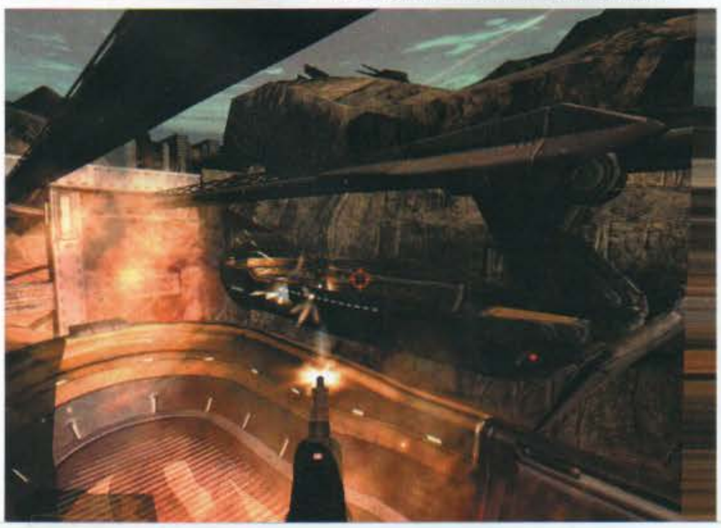
FORMATS: 360, PC (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £30 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: RAVEN
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E154







Opponents of *Doom 3*'s improbable restrictions on torch use will be relieved at having a lightbulb-empowered firearm back in their hands. This is no ghost train, and id has been sensible enough to honour that difference



It's an irony that, in the world of firstperson shooters, incredible beauty comes so often from stunning ugliness. Gorgeous mangled horror, sumptuous giblets, shadows like clotted blood, sex and death. Time and again, FPSes raise the graphical bar in this manner. *Far Cry* is the notable recent exception, of course, but beyond its technology *Quake 4* cares not for modernity. Non-linear play, wide-open spaces and player-defined tactics are studiously ignored. You have a corridor. Beyond: a room. Inside: something wicked. Boom – not any more. And so on. Whether you find that atavistic or gleefully pure, only those with no light in their soul could deny that the sensational sights make a difference.

Created and enhanced, Strogg-like, from the still-warm body of *Doom 3*, neither *Q4*'s looks nor corridor-based nature were ever in doubt. Nevertheless, there are surprises: the quality of the animation; the seemingly endless upsurge in grotesquery; the brutal drenching of thick red, blue, orange lighting, colour thick enough for photons to drown in, the edge of the ocean of darkness as soft as sand. *Doom 3* looks plain now, and the desire to see what's next is strong.

It's not always satisfying, however. A second surprise is the inclusion of outdoor spaces and vehicle sections, but here both the visuals and the play mechanic are less impressive. Though you have complete freedom of movement, the areas are so restricted as to negate it. What's more, while the player becomes essentially bigger and more powerful, so do the enemies. The sensation, then, remains much the same as when on foot, except now movement is cumbersome and the backgrounds self-consciously low-res. The on-rails shooting sections, tellingly, are more satisfying, despite being somewhat underwhelming themselves.

These token sops to progress are brief, comprising perhaps five to eight per cent of the game. But back in the corridors it's not just the view that keeps you going – the combat is highly satisfying. And of course, despite your status as humanity's last best hope, you're not fighting alone. From the doomed (no pun intended) opening dropship ride to the very last scene, the player is constantly reminded of the other troops in the war. Often this is simply by way of arms caches, torn human bodies and the seemingly catch-all objective of 'regrouping', but meetings with other (small) groups help keep your mind on the overall effort. And while they'll ship out and fight alongside you, there's never the sensation – as there was in *Half-Life 2*, for instance – that they're stealing your kills. They never get in the way or behave so that friendly fire becomes the only just response. They are, in fact, useful and remarkably human. The times they stop barking about kicking ass and wonder how the Strogg could do such things add a real-world context, a refocusing that increases the horror. It's not on the level of *HL2*'s weary, crying couple on the sofa, but is still unexpected for what's otherwise a cheerful romp through other people's gibs.

Not that your Stroggified foes are still whole people, of course, something players will come to appreciate for themselves around halfway through, but you do have a little more space to fight than in the donor game. *Quake 4*'s spaces are slightly less claustrophobic than *Doom 3*'s tight areas –



Strogg Harvesters make for intimidating adversaries, similar in basic appearance to their namesakes in The Matrix, but with more firepower than an *HL2* Strider

> There are surprises: the quality of the animation, the upsurge in grotesquery. Doom 3 looks plain now, and the desire to see what's next is strong







Multiplayer matches see contestants blaze across their maps with all the speed and gravity-defying exuberance expected by fans of *Quake III* deathmatches. Stopping to think in an open space is tantamount to suicide



Comparisons with *Doom 3*, though inevitable, are thankfully not as justified as initially feared. The environments are more vivid and diverse, while the presence of allied troops brings a sense of camaraderie and much-needed energy to its campaign





Vehicles such as the Hover Tank do little to remove the player from the standard mode of play, offering greater firepower as a means of overcoming proportionately greater adversity. The increased mobility offered in some instances only makes the environments feel even smaller

and the enemies are almost always ahead – so fights are less likely to end with the player blasting away while pinned against a wall. Occasional boss battles are mostly well judged, centring on blowing away shields before destroying the life inside, neat health bars making this obvious. The final battle, however, is likely to drain the player's will along with their ammo, and could – in our review code, at least – be short-circuited into a lengthy pummelling with zero opposition. It wasn't particularly edifying, though such things are in a minority.

Multiplayer is almost a different game: one with *Quake III: Arena* written on it, perhaps. The pace, the nature of weapons and the style of combat all differ wildly from the main game, and despite the visual makeover – which will stretch all but the hardiest of machines in big matches – this is no more related to *Q4* than *QII* was to *QIII*. On the other hand, it remains fast, balanced and utterly pure. Being able to fire through teleporters is a nice tweak; samey weaponry is not. This game's focus is its singleplayer campaign, and it's an involving, dynamic, astonishing-looking 12-15-hour bloodbath. A good, old-fashioned bloodbath. **[8]**

Health and fitness

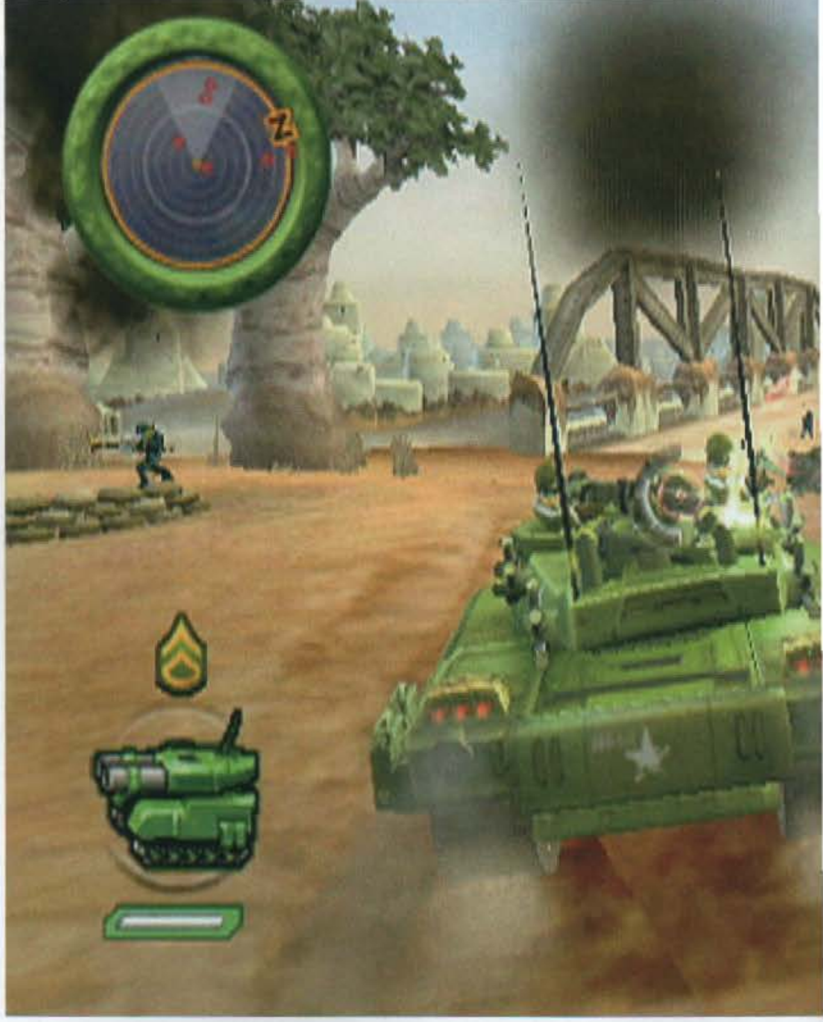


Meeting with other squads of humans means more than just a few extra guns for the next ten minutes. Each squad has a tech and a medic – both are keen to restore your health and your shields, before admonishing you to 'be more careful in future'. Tech guys also periodically upgrade your biggest guns, though the results are not always impressive. Ordinary health packs and occasional stations remain, too, while the player is able to use Strogg health stations after around halfway through the game.



BATTALION WARS

FORMAT: GC PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), DEC 9 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: KUJU ENTERTAINMENT
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151







Recon jeeps are often the most sensible choice for player control, offering a little armour and decent offensive capabilities. More importantly, they have the ability to traverse the battlefield at speed

A degree of confusion and concern has surrounded *Battalion Wars* from the start. Fans of Nintendo's impeccable *Advance Wars*, who'd long been expecting and hoping to see its turn-based stratagems transposed to a home console, were stunned to find its mantle draped loosely over a ballistic, realtime tactical-action hybrid from a relatively undistinguished British studio. A change of title and art direction did little to reassure, pulling it both away from and towards its stablemate, suggesting a game in the throes of a painful identity crisis; to admirers of *Advance Wars*' pared-down clarity of purpose, that, above all else, was anathema. The side of the struggle they perhaps didn't see was that of a sound, original concept trying to reach fruition with both its individual character and the precious brand values of its adoptive family intact. At last all these concerns can be laid to rest, because this sturdy, immediate wargame is a disgrace to nothing and nobody, including, most importantly, itself.

Battalion Wars is one of a kind, eluding comparison with its myriad influences almost as quickly as it invokes them. Essentially an RTS overlaid on a thirdperson combat title, giving you hands-on control of any of the infantry, armour or air units under your command, its long-lost ancestor could be *Cannon Fodder*, but its closest cousin is probably Nintendo's surreal *Pikmin*. This is strategy rewritten for consoles from the ground up, putting the player in the thick of the action and focusing on the division of labour between small, relatively autonomous squads. The comparison ends there, though: *Battalion Wars* has none of *Pikmin*'s bucolic adventuring or resource management, and a great deal more arcade-like intensity and strategic depth packed into its tightly edited and scripted levels.

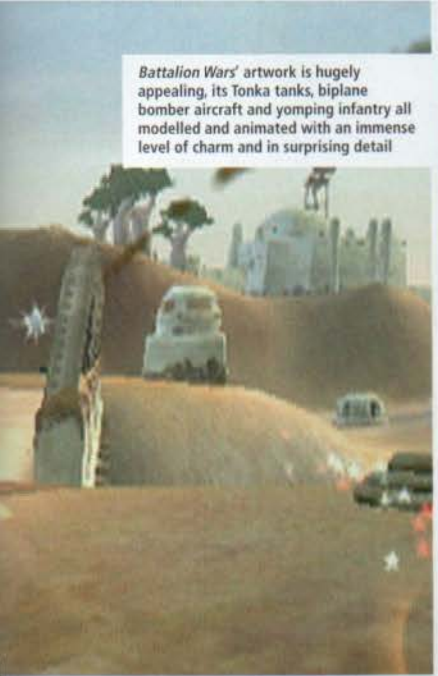
It's the action that comes first, and despite its lock-on system it surprisingly recalls *Halo* in its hectic firefights, with smart, independently minded AI and exaggerated vehicle handling (in fact, the recon jeeps so closely resemble Warthogs that Kuju couldn't resist a cheeky wholesale quote from Bungie's masterpiece in an early level). But strategic command, having been gently, almost surreptitiously expanded and expounded over the first campaign, dominates the game in the end. A unit will often if not always be more effective in your hands, but it's rare for deeds rather than thoughts to turn the tide of a battle; hands-on control is here purely for fun, which, though simple, it certainly is.

Advance Wars' exquisitely balanced interplay of unit types is copied up to a point, because it would be foolish not to: infantry are vulnerable to tanks are vulnerable to bazookas are vulnerable to infantry, and so on; every action has a reaction, every attack must be defended. But it's a more forgiving schema, acknowledging the need for a little headroom for improvisation in the much more fluid and random world of realtime combat. All-rounders like the minigun-toting combat vets and the heavy recon reflect this, while other new units imaginatively exploit the tactical possibilities of detailed, three-dimensional geography – the mortar troops, for example, whose bombardment can flush enemies out of cover and into waiting infantry fire.





The characters are crude, the humour childish, cutscenes are clumsy and the voice acting grates. But few will be able to resist a chuckle at the familiar tones of a lunkheaded Xylvanian commander who wants to be made 'Governator'



Battalion Wars' artwork is hugely appealing, its Tonka tanks, biplane bomber aircraft and yomping infantry all modelled and animated with an immense level of charm and in surprising detail







Helicopters are closely integrated with the war on the ground, but air combat exists at a certain remove from the rest of the action, weighted toward control skill rather than any strategy





The action can be viewed either from a low, tight angle with good forward visibility, or a bird's-eye perspective. Both are useful, and it's only when trying to get a lock on air units from the ground that the camera frustrates

A couple of ugly difficulty spikes notwithstanding, *Battalion Wars*' levels are well designed to exploit the possibilities that unfold with each new unit type and to offer a variety of objectives – defence, base capture, infiltration and full-on assault – as well as a mix of careful planning and quick-thinking response. They're tough, too; the relative imprecision and element of luck inherent in *Battalion Wars* mean victory is seldom the foregone conclusion it can be in *Advance Wars*' immutably logical world. The fragility of even the best-laid plans can frustrate, and it's a shame that some levels simply can't be beaten (or, at least, beaten well) without foreknowledge.

However, an ambitious hybrid such as *Battalion Wars* – especially one aiming, as it does, for all-inclusive accessibility – will ultimately stand or fall on the design of its interface, not its content. In this, *Battalion Wars* is almost brilliant: crisp, intuitive and direct, but just a little too slender, lacking one or two vital tools that could have made it a classic. With direct control occupying the stick, triggers (for lock-on and free look) and A-button, strategic command is boiled down effectively to selection of units (by type or individually) on the C-stick, and two buttons: one toggling between follow and defend, one for attack. It works well, but you can't send units to a position without either directing them to attack something or leading them there by hand, making intelligent use of the terrain much more laborious than it needs to be. Similarly, there's no simple way to give a single order to a mixed group of units, even one hand-picked to follow you (a method actively encouraged by the design), leading to stressful fumbling at inopportune moments. The map, too – your most important tool of all, essential to planning – is needlessly clunky and poorly integrated.

Battalion Wars is one of a kind, eluding comparison with its influences as quickly as it invokes them. Its long-lost ancestor could be Cannon Fodder

However, it's only *Battalion Wars*' overall polish and functional elegance that make these few cumbersome flaws so glaring. Indeed, you could almost argue that a little unruliness and imprecision are consistent with the rowdy charm and immediacy that set it so far apart from any peers. As a game, *Battalion Wars* is good; as an experiment in genre cross-breeding and subtle, hands-free franchising, it's very nearly a triumph. **[7]**

Learn to stop worrying



Battalion Wars **begins with a rapidly thawing cartoon cold war between the Western Frontier and the Tundran Republic, and yes, those disguises are as thin as they seem (accompanied by accents that are thick to match). Though it follows Nintendo guidelines for the handling of volatile military subject matter – fantasy settings, former enemies uniting against a 'real' evil, and a general air of sporting exuberance –** ***Battalion Wars*** **nonetheless cuts a little closer to the bone of history. Its cast, setting, story and crude comedy are best described as a pre-watershed Carry On Doctor Strangelove, and though the chunky retrofuturist hardware is pure** ***Advance Wars*** **and the Western Frontier troops at the player's command are as American as apple pie, the sense of humour and fondness for oblique reference are distinctly British.**



FEAR

FORMAT: PC **PRICE:** £30 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: VIVENDI UNIVERSAL
DEVELOPER: MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E147





To their barest bones, *FEAR*'s locations boast layer upon layer of destructible furniture. Toss a grenade into a random corner and revel in the shower of glass, fire and disintegrated concrete, all of which erupts in a direction governed by its meticulously applied physics engine

It's hard to begrudge Monolith for indulging in the kind of waiting and guessing games traditionally played by the movie industry. The developer's grisly new FPS has, after all, derived as much from there as it has from any continent of the gaming world. Katsuhiro Otomo, Masamune Shirow and Hideo Nakata have, through their own endeavours, not only inspired but damn near dictated one or other of the game's major components, as of course has The Matrix. But as coarse a pastiche as it may be, *FEAR* has nonetheless been woven together with a laudable degree of insight. Its action peaks at retina-burning levels of intensity, but its developer understands that the invasive powers of the game's spectral dark side must ultimately remain omnipotent.

From the outset, *FEAR* demonstrates a sound knowledge of its game-literate audience. It knows, for example, that with a carefully staged series of jump scares and false alarms it can turn the average PC shooter fan's love of crisp cornering against them, instilling a moment's hesitation into every subsequent flick of the mouse. Other routine actions such as ladder descents are peppered with similar split-second



FEAR's vaguely interactive hallucinations are its most effective mindgames, often forcing you to blast away at demonic apparitions before abruptly returning you to reality, your breathing heavy, your last frantic shot smashing into an innocuous wall or furnishing. Few games have managed to achieve such an immediately convincing sense of dislocation, especially on the PC

disturbances, methodically severing the player from the reassuring gameplan of FPS tradition. Like *Project Zero*, this is a game that compulsively hijacks your every connection to it, buffeting POV, control and physics with variously aggressive poltergeist assaults. The game's ambient audio and score – both of a superlative quality throughout – play further nefarious tricks of their own, conjuring up a particularly caustic soundscape of discordant harmonies and indeterminable, diabolical noises. Though it's an otherwise slow introduction, *FEAR*'s setup paves the way for an unpredictable meander between action and suspense.

And what action. Every weapon in *FEAR* fires ballistic Catherine wheels that leave nothing short of a crater in their intended target and fogs of dust and debris in their wake. Bullets whistle about the air in a dozen different Doppler-enhanced tones while their casings chime as they dance upon the floor, a rainstorm of sparks filling whichever parts of the screen remain unoccupied. Kick the action into bullet-time and you'll uncover even more beauty behind this barrage. Thanks in part to a high contrast filter that'll be familiar to those who toyed with *Far Cry*'s Realistic setting, *FEAR* in slow motion makes you feel less a soldier than a cinematographer. You'll notice weapons spiralling as their barrels draw smoke circles in the air, their owners travelling through similarly graceful trajectories as the existing records for ragdoll gymnastics are duly overwritten. Of course, no such mode is complete without those trademark bullet ripples, and the addition of air-wobbling grenade explosions is a satisfying enough way of raising that particular bar.

But we've known all this for a while now, such has been the drip-feed of information and playable material that has painstakingly built *FEAR* its enviable reputation. The real question has always concerned what the game can offer beyond movie-trailer iconography, slow-mo swearing and fancy exhibitions of DirectX 9, and the answer is sometimes more than anticipated, and sometimes less. *FEAR* is a brilliant arena for what you might call urban siege warfare, its innocuously decorated interiors leaving you ample opportunity to hide, recover and strategise, but never for too long. Troop AI has a wonderful habit of exploiting the alternative routes a hasty player overlooks, bursting through windows to escape and outflank and seldom charging forth when more advantageous positions are available.

> The real question has always concerned what the game can offer beyond movie-trailer iconography, slow-mo swearing and fancy exhibitions of DirectX

Gaming's use of prefab corporate offices, subterranean laboratories and corroded water treatment facilities has, however, reached the point where their destruction is their sole raison d'etre. While the ceiling panels remain fixed and the plaster remains intact on the walls, they become less

FEAR's implementation of bullet-time is surely gaming's most refined. Slow motion not only enables elaborate run-and-gun tactics, but facilitates the precise evasion of incoming fire and the bounding manoeuvres that can take you from a hurried place of refuge to a strategic position







Norton Mapes is one of *FEAR*'s multitude of cinematic steals – a Jurassic Park-inspired self-serving slob whose intimate knowledge of his company's security systems sets up many of the game's latter-half objectives





Covered head to toe in thick armour and sometimes even optic camouflage, *FEAR*'s more significant adversaries guarantee an exhilarating showdown – the kind that has you double checking your weapon clips and bullet-time reserves at the first opportunity



First Encounter Assault and Recon is very much depicted as a team during cutscenes and idle moments, but the entirety of the game's action revolves around you. Squad-based combat only features as a facet of the story, and you'll have more aural contact with HQ than you will direct contact with NPCs



The gruff verbal exchanges among squads of AI offer many helpful clues. As you hide to replenish slow-mo and health, your opponents' reinforcement calls and damage reports can often dictate the aggressiveness of your subsequent assault

Nakatomi Plaza and more the local branch of Staples – not something that serves *FEAR* well when it's at its lowest ebb. The game experiences its biggest slumps, in fact, during those moments when its relentless homage is forced to take a rest and something entirely game-specific is ushered in instead. The game's largely exploratory midsection, therefore, is as flabby as they come.

It should also come as no surprise that a game derived largely from cinema should choose cinematics (interactive or otherwise) to portray its most potent scenes, priming itself for dramatic closure but, in game terms, lapsing into a rather pedestrian dénouement. A climactic duel or firefight may not have suited its story down to the ground, but would arguably have left a more lasting impression than the effects-heavy runaround the game has employed instead. This is one of a number of tangible clashes between the twin sentiments of frights and firepower, and it'd be interesting to know just how much friction, if any, existed between the two at the preproduction stage.

FEAR also remains an absolute monster in terms of system specs, and thus undermines (for the ill-prepared user) some otherwise effective shocks and reveals with a laboured crunch as textures are forced past the threshold of 1Gb of RAM. Further impact is then lost by the game's carbon copying of many, if not most, of its scares. Those who aren't familiar with movies such as The Ring and Dark Water are guaranteed an experience a dozen times as chilling as those who are.

In opposition of its marketing pitch, then, it's perhaps best to view FEAR less as a horror show punctuated by action than as a blistering combative spectacle that likes to play games with its guests. Its blood-spouting imagery may already be too hackneyed in its original form to prove memorable in this one, but its bullet-time sights and strategies remain immaculately implemented to the point of redefinition. *FEAR*'s advertised terror may not fully transpire, but action FPS game developers still have every right to be scared.

[8]

Pingu



Multiplayer *FEAR* has come far since its recent beta, performing to an acceptable degree for those equipped to enjoy the singleplayer story. Its slow-mo effect (now a pickup one player can use to affect everyone else) ensures that the game's artistic roots are adhered to, but it's still evident that this is a oneplayer game jury-rigged to be playable by many. The selection of modes is very much the genre default, and the deathmatch and CTF events are unlikely to keep players away from the likes of *Battlefield 2* and *Quake 4* for particularly long. The server browser is also somewhat flimsy, while games themselves take an age to load. *Soldier Of Fortune* fans, however, should appreciate the game's physics-heavy sense of gravity and impact.



VIEWTIFUL JOE: BATTLE CARNIVAL

FORMAT: GC PRICE: ¥6,800 (£34)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JPN), Q1 2006 (UK, US)
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



Abduction ruction



Cropping up throughout battles are VFX icons that don't offer the player any particular power, but when used they'll rip open a hole in the stage that sucks up all combatants. They're then transported to a minigame interlude that pits the players in one of a handful of colourful speed and reaction tests. One spirited show of power from the winner(s) later, the loser(s) take a hit as they're returned to the stage, scattering handfuls of their precious coin collection around the stage for others to snaffle up.

Capcom has proven its ability to take a complex concept and use it in some intelligent contexts, as both previous *Viewtiful Joe* games attest. But taking that complexity – the signature VFX powers of the series, of editing time and space – into the blunt, frenetic showground of the four-way arena beat 'em up may be an even more complicated task.

But *Battle Carnival* copes moderately well with Joe's legacy, transferring these trademark abilities from one big screen to another, this time in a game whose plot is typically centred on cinema, and sees Captain Blue holding violent auditions for a suitable heir to his movie-hero throne. The Slow power is an obvious, momentary patch of time control, while Mach Speed now ignites the player in a cloud of flame while allowing them to fly around the stage. And the use of Zoom is tipped on its head, and suitably so: instead of causing the camera to close in on the player, Zoom now causes the player to swell to gigantic size. The consequences of these VFX powers feel lessened this time around, sure, but not at all forced.





***Battle Carnival* obviously can't offer the meteoric roster of fighters packed into *Super Smash Bros Melee* or *Jump Superstars* – it has 12 in all – but the move set for each character is different and vivid enough to encourage replay, however exhausting the combat may be**

They appear as colour-coded items that drop into each stage, with players being trailed obediently by the powers they've collected, but not used. These powers can't be stacked, though, as each combatant can use just one of them at a time. Which is perfectly in line with the amount of action, collectibles and hubbub that heats up the screen during each 'scene' of battle, with Slow feeling to be the only VFX skill to add any tactical possibility to the fray instead of just adding to the madness.

Still, those characteristically dry, almost chalky visuals lend themselves well to the game's many stages and set-pieces, where it makes liberal, almost flippant use of the franchise, with instantly familiar props, bosses and locales popping up gleefully throughout the game's story mode. This singleplayer aspect is instantly engaging, too, but it comes from speedy pacing and variety of objectives rather than intricacy of combat.

There are just too many elements in play at once for it to feel like there's true subtlety to be exploited. Indeed, when fully zoomed out – usually during fourplayer rumbles – levels and their contents become supremely hard to track and manage. But through the crush of it all, *Viewtiful Joe*'s pedigree for fusing entertainment and quality is clearly visible throughout the chaos, even if it doesn't necessarily shine. **[7]**



When the player's energy bar empties and they fall in battle – albeit to respawn a few moments later – they dispense a large coin worth a *lot* of points, booty that can very often decide the winner of the match

As well as the return and modification of several traditional VFX powers, a new one has been added to *Battle Carnival*: Sound Effect. It's a charge attack that allows the player to strike out with three-way blasts of comic-book exclamations. Goof the timing, however, and you'll be rewarded with nothing but a damp squib









RenderWare has been put to amazing use across all of DICE's new environments – the framerate never drops (though the PS2 version's singleplayer game is less fortunate), the draw distance seldom closes and the detail remains convincing



Quite how EA Chertsey has managed to handle its half of *Battlefield* so badly is anyone's guess. Perhaps we should be thankful that DICE chose to spend its time honing its own conversion rather than holding its publisher's hand



The singleplayer game is petrified of alienating less gutsy players, coughing up rewards for the slightest 'achievement'. You can pump shotgun rounds wildly at distant targets and still be hailed a perfectionist



BATTLEFIELD 2: MODERN COMBAT

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX (BOTH TESTED) PRICE: £40 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 18
PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE/DICE PREVIOUSLY IN: E146, E150, E155

You don't have to be the most jaded opponent of massmarket gaming to see EA Chertsey's individualisation of *Battlefield*'s singleplayer mode as a deliberate cheapening of the experience, shaving much of its endemic appeal for the sake of keeping its audience more immediately entertained. The bombardment of contrived rewards in solo play is on a par with that of bullets, and together with the comparative ease with which its AI bots are dispatched, it represents a quite vulgar attempt at popularisation – one tapped by the post-*Burnout* magic wand that EA appears to believe will work on most of its upcoming slate.

What *Modern Combat* proves is that *Battlefield* is clearly DICE's war, and though it may have sponsored it throughout the years, EA is something of a rookie when placed on its frontlines. From its overpowered weapons and gormless AI to its pedestrian objectives, the singleplayer game is as dumb as it is misguided – an embarrassment to the rather splendid multiplayer game that, fortunately, represents all that's really important.

There are no user-defined bot battles in *Modern Combat*, so online is the only way to experience its true interpretation of *Battlefield* action. Back in February, on both of its formats, the game already had both a solid engine and a bevy of seemingly complete and highly enjoyable levels – it's clear that DICE has wasted little of the time since in accomplishing its remaining objectives. On both PS2 and Xbox, *Modern Combat* handles online issues such as lag and framerate with all the expertise you'd expect from a developer versed in the art of uniting distant gamers. Sweetening that achievement are RenderWare-powered levels that'll steal no thunder from *BF2*'s sprawling stages, but are nonetheless exquisite finds in this generation of consoles.

As if to prove that there's no better interpreter of a system than its author, the Swedish studio has adapted its PC game with enough insight to make it feel entirely at home on more humble hardware. A cross-formation of weapons can be invoked and selected with little more than a shoulder-button press and a flick of an analogue stick while, from a convenience standpoint, the game benefits from having a unified scheme rather than the separate pairing of mouse and stick. The game's title is still something of a misnomer because, for all the urban peripherals at your troops' disposal, the true innovations of *Battlefield 2* (such as Squad and Commander modes) remain exclusive to PC. But the marquee moments of vanilla *Battlefield* are all here, and the tools that make them possible have been masterfully refashioned.

Evidently, EA's in-house efforts at growing the game's market have in no way impeded those of its Swedish collaborators, which at least scores a thumbs-up for its project management. While the possibility of offline newcomers walking away with a potentially soured perspective of this series is lamentable, we should ultimately consider ourselves lucky, because rarely has so much bad existed in something this good. **[8]**







Spewing out gold and weaponry like a Libyan fruit machine, the debriefing process in singleplayer is no more appropriate than such a concept. The solo game fails to realise that *BF* moments should speak for themselves

War on terra



Scattered wide across the ecological climes of Kazakhstan, *Modern Combat*'s multiplayer maps offer as eclectic a range of wartime strategies as they do sightseeing opportunities. Urban guerrilla tactics are cleverly played off against those of incursive peacekeepers, while elsewhere the disciplines of trench, marine, open and motorised conflict are given similar attention. In traditional *Battlefield* ticket matches, control points are always situated in the most tactically stimulating places, rewarding those who learn to make optimum use of the diverse terrain. Similarly, inappropriate use of your faction's available vehicles will strip your team of those most essential weapons – often a squad's last bastion of defence against overwhelming opposition fire.





PURSUIT FORCE

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £35 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: BIGBIG PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E154

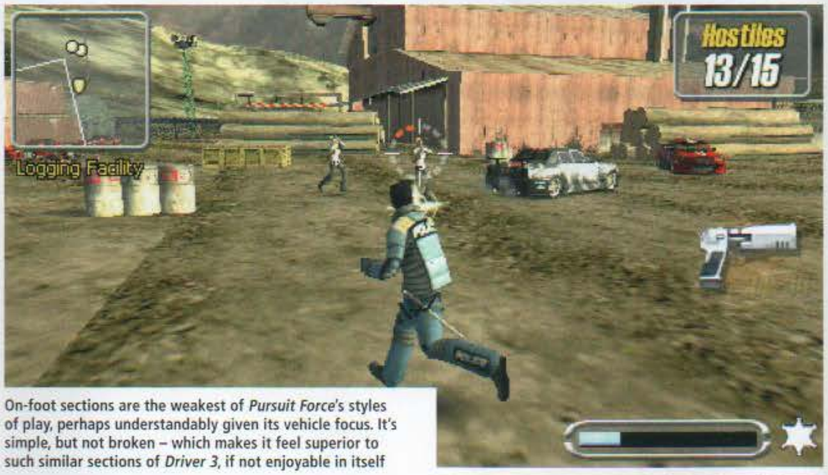
Non-trivial non-pursuit



Making the game feel like more of a package and not just a series of gang-themed challenges, courses unlocked in the career mode are subsequently used for time-trial and race objectives in alternative modes. These are welcome, but suffer slightly due to their length – the size of certain courses is understandable given their use in career mode, but could have provided a sharper and more enjoyable contest through some judicious editing. Some of the time trials' medals have high scores in excess of three or four minutes, goals that can begin to grind when vehicle handling just isn't subtle enough to make it feel worthwhile.

This, then, is something of a rarity for PSP as its software catalogue currently stands. A title that's not a conversion, update or spin-off, but also one that has production ambitions – in concept and genre – that tend towards those of a regular console title. Of course, there have been other recent hopefuls to push the PSP's potential in this direction, but they've arguably not fulfilled that promise – *Coded Arms* dulled all too quickly, and *Death Jr* lived up to its name in unfortunate fashion by being a pint-sized casualty.

Pursuit Force has a strong idea at its core, one of a driving/shooting hybrid that presents its inter-vehicle battles with the angles and stunts of an action movie, as its protagonist leaps between cars as if they were speeding stepping-stones. It plays well with that idea, too, since the option to jump from your vehicle and commandeer another is handled via a tight system, activated with a direction and single button press, and choreographed decently. The gunplay has nothing exceptional about it, but is as solid and straightforward as the game requires it to be. This ease of use doesn't detract from *Pursuit Force*, however, but gives its action a good rhythm, allowing these elements to come together smoothly as the player ditches their near-wrecked vehicles for something fresh; capturing an enemy transport usually results in some improved firepower, too.



On-foot sections are the weakest of *Pursuit Force*'s styles of play, perhaps understandably given its vehicle focus. It's simple, but not broken – which makes it feel superior to such similar sections of *Driver 3*, if not enjoyable in itself

A 'justice' bar is boosted by attacks on the enemy, and depleted by assaulting civilians. Filling it is imperative as, besides enabling a capability for mid-air shooting, it can replenish the player's energy or repair a vehicle's damage. It can lead to slight frustration as well, however, since avoiding confrontation is far trickier than embracing it when play gets hectic. It's not so much vehicle handling that causes this, more the situations and the traffic that litters each course; that handling is, however, at its least enjoyable when the player is faced with sharp bends and tight corners.

Its looks aren't rich, but are dependably fluid and clear, with streams of trackside objects and course names that wouldn't look out of place in any other arcadey racer. The play itself isn't blessed with much variety, either, but has solidity and the capacity to distract, and it delivers on its promise of realising pursuit scenarios in a fast-paced and energetic manner – it's a pleasing experience, but not exceptional. It doesn't quite fulfill that console conceit outlined above, though, but that's perhaps for the best: any further complication or grandeur feels like it would just as likely slow *Pursuit Force* down. **[7]**



***Pursuit Force*'s vehicles are well behaved when the bends in the road aren't too severe, but when the path ahead starts to snake, steering can sometimes be irritating**



Despite a down-to-earth setting, there's an unreality about *Pursuit Force* that goes beyond its action feats and slightly futuristic vehicles to its comic-book characters and audio fashioned from the moody funk of a '70s cop show









BROTHERS IN ARMS: EARNED IN BLOOD

FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: GEARBOX SOFTWARE

EA may be the king of the annual sequel but Ubisoft has easily out-trumped one of its main rivals by publishing another sterling instalment of *Brothers In Arms* in no less than eight months. Cynics will moan that's it's a lazy and purely commercial move but when every aspect of the original has been so effectively honed and improved any such talk smacks of unfair, mean-spirited criticism. Just a few minutes of *Earned In Blood* is enough to indicate that this is a far more expansive, gritty and challenging experience.

The game's situational AI has now been enhanced significantly, allowing the series' brand of tactical combat to really shine. In *Road To Hill 30* levels were too confined and enemies tended to stubbornly dig themselves into defensive positions – fixing and flanking these embattled foes became too easy, their inability to take up alternative positions a massive advantage in your favour. Now the German troops show a guile and unpredictability that rarely gives you a dull moment. Flanking is still effective but never surefire, the enemy's ability to regroup, run for better cover or panic and charge you in desperation a breath of fresh air in a genre more noted for brainless run-and-gun action.

But *Earned In Blood*'s new wide-open battlefields can be as devastating to you as they are to the enemy. Careful scouting is crucial because German tanks can suddenly, and terrifyingly, lurch over the brow of a hill, while infantry units can suddenly pop up on your flank – yes, they now employ the very same tactics. There's tension around every hedgerow and always a sweaty, heartfelt sense of relief whenever you clear a village or field of its fiendish enemies.

This time you play Sergeant Joe 'Red' Hartsock in a story that runs parallel to the events in *Road To Hill 30*. The attention to historical detail and impressive bonus material give your battles in the muddy fields of Normandy added resonance and those familiar with the encounters in the first game will recognise locations and a few friendly faces. The attention to detail is exquisite – allies that take hits develop scars, for instance, and uniforms deteriorate over the course of the game. It all adds to the sense of place and authenticity and the men under your command become more than just puppets for you to manipulate (a factor further enhanced by bonus material that can only be earned if you keep them all alive).

Though the fixing and flanking tactic arguably gets a little tired by the end of the game the addition of ten more Skirmish maps and improved online games is another feather in the cap for Gearbox. On the surface, *Earned In Blood* might not seem like a radical departure from the original but the gloriously cascading AI and open maps have effectively transformed it into a very special WWII experience. The fact that there's nothing quite like it in such a crowded genre speaks volumes. **[8]**

Taking damage in *Earned In Blood* can be both dramatic and beautiful: the game features some cracking motion-blur effects, slick blood splatters and the effect of tinnitus ringing through your speakers – evoking the sights, sounds and danger of close WWII combat brilliantly





Larger battlefields and more varied objectives ensure *Earned In Blood* never gets repetitive. Marking supply drops with flares in an open field is as bowel-loosening and tense as it sounds



Issuing orders is all done via the triggers and sticks, preventing the action breaking up by entering menus. It's also now possible to direct armoured divisions and even man guns



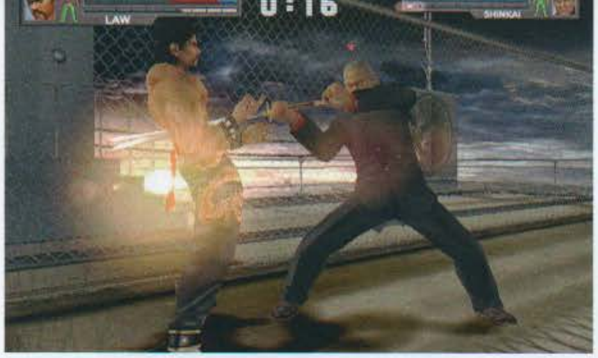


Your relationship with your men matures over the course of the game and every loss becomes heartfelt. However, an option to revive downed teammates can be used if you're really struggling at a checkpoint

Situational comedy



The *Brothers in Arms* 'situational awareness' map is an excellent idea but still suffers from control issues. Because you can only focus on unit types, with the camera panning, zooming and rotating around them, it's sometimes difficult to get a broad overview of the area and plan a route that isn't near to an objective, ally or enemy. The camera also has a habit of ostentatiously rotating around newly selected units causing you to lose your bearings. An optional and controllable free-floating viewpoint would surely have been a much greater asset to the player.



As Namco tradition dictates, the completion of story mode wins only half the battle. Unlockables include a ranked freeplay mode and over 60 fighters, including *Tekken*'s Marshall Law and Paul Phoenix. Sadly, the duo don't integrate as well as you'd hope



URBAN REIGN

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£30) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E151

Raze the titanic



One *Reign* enemy in particular, named Golem, is as true a test of patience as he is a worthy one. As well as a high level of tactical awareness and versatility, a great deal of patience and understanding is also required in order to overcome his onslaught. Dodges must be perfect and consistent, often followed not by furious counters but by retreat. Golem can employ the same power-ups as you can, but when he does he not only becomes near-invulnerable but also recharges much of his health. Worse still, the axe that he joyously bats you about the arena with takes an age to knock from his hand, while conversely he can have it from yours with the merest slap.

Urban Reign is quite the heretic – a *Tekken*-powered game that champions immaculately timed dodges over meticulously remembered button sequences, and one commonly regarded as a street brawler yet fought within 100 enclosed arena battles and never as a linear trek. But to what degree does any of this deny it the imperatives of the forlorn beat 'em up genre?

The answer to that question isn't so much that it doesn't, but that the said necessities simply don't qualify as such in modern gaming. Nostalgic flops such as *Spikeout: Battle Street* and *Beat Down: Fists Of Vengeance* succeeded in little more than securing the sidescrolling fighter's coffin with an outer layer of cement, so forgive us if we don't immediately denounce Namco's offbeat effort on account of its apparent disrespect for the dead. Structurally, *Urban Reign* is more *Def Jam* than *Double Dragon*, but its tight controls, brisk action and clashing east/west flavour make it a valid contestant for both games' turfs. Mechanically, it keeps attack, dodge, throw and run commands bound to single buttons, and uses that simplicity as an excuse to usher in a brutally volatile brand of battle royale brawling.



Multiplayer boasts support for four players via multitap and provides a showcase of the many fighting styles that define its characters. Modes such as Weapon Battle and Destruction Battle introduce some novel objectives to the usual routine

By accepting the game's invitation to touch gloves, feet, elbows, knees and heads with multiple opponents, you'll also have to accept that they'll often retaliate in a manner that suitably reflects the odds. But *Reign* is all about the earning, exploitation and elimination of opportunity. Dodging and chaining attacks gradually makes available the specials that can either counter an overwhelming assault or launch a devastating one of your own, and in the gauge that regulates their use lies much of an intricate balancing act. Moves and tactics that the game sees as particularly exploitative –



Mastery of *Reign*'s dodge-and-weave defensive system is key to attaining position for its spectacular multi-person regional attacks. Time them badly, however, and there's every chance that they'll backfire into a fierce reprisal

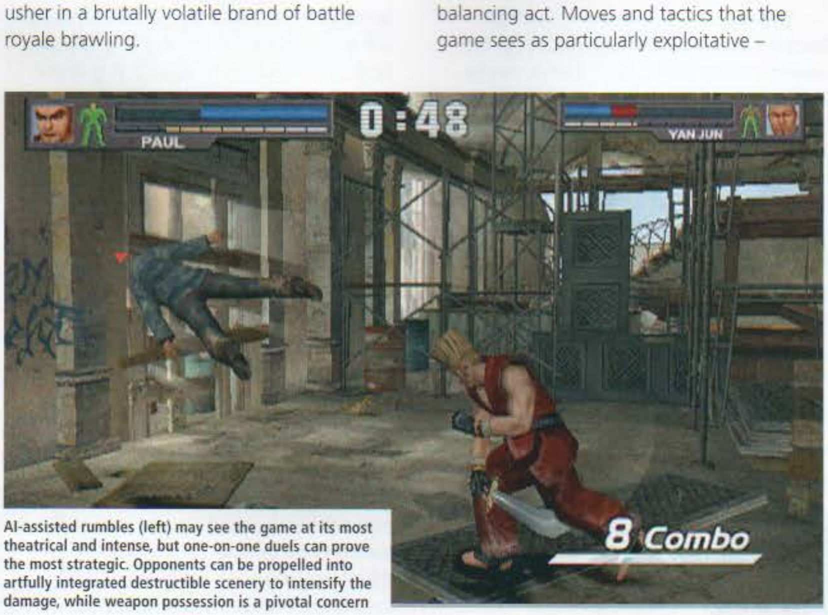
beating a downed opponent, for example, especially in large numbers – do more for the special gauge of the victim than they do the attacker's. Fence someone into a corner in this game and chances are they'll explode.

The windows for evasion and reversal in *Urban Reign* are so small that you may think they don't actually exist, but they do, slipping open for almost every incoming move and combo. Creating and breaking sequences of moves is an unusually clean and consistent process in this game – one that makes effortless and logical the bridging of different families of attacks; just don't assume that you're safe within those commonly uninterruptible throw animations.

Namco has fashioned a game that champions challenge above fairness, and this is something that many people are going to have a hard time coming to terms with. But for all those who gun *Reign* down for toying with its own rules and essentially cheating on the player at times it feels are appropriate, there'll hopefully be as many who recognise that such times *are* appropriate and that even the dirtiest of its tricks can be bested. It may offend a few beat 'em up religions with its beliefs, but for those it converts it's all the better for it. **[7]**







AI-assisted rumbles (left) may see the game at its most theatrical and intense, but one-on-one duels can prove the most strategic. Opponents can be propelled into artfully integrated destructible scenery to intensify the damage, while weapon possession is a pivotal concern



SLY 3: HONOR AMONG THIEVES

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OCTOBER 28 (UK), OUT NOW (US)
PUBLISHER: SCEA DEVELOPER: SUCKER PUNCH
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E155



As *Sly 3* sees the thieving raccoon begin the hunt for his family's hidden stash of valuables, so it sees him padding ever further from the platforming-oriented values of his debut. Sticking with the hub worlds and elongated, heist-style set-ups of *Sly 2*, agile exploration of these open-plan areas has been downplayed further, with the removal of the trademark clue bottle collectibles. Instead, *Sly 3*'s appetite for minigames comes close to the greed of *Wario Ware*, albeit in much slower motion. With every objective attempted, some kind of gimmick, twist or adjustment (sometimes literally, for the player – see 'Eye max') gets involved; the need to patrol each hub in order to reach the start point for each plot-advancing goal is still here, and can sometimes feel like a slight irritation when you're just retreading the same ground. But once those goals kick in, it's as if Sucker Punch is adamant that the player won't feel short-changed in terms of content.

This finely chopped dosage of well-produced play styles extends to the game's non-story elements, too; a number of splitscreen versus and coop modes are now present, often cribbed from the most apt distractions that appear in Sly's main quest. All objectives can be replayed, some in 3D, while some of the completed tasks form the basis for the Master Thief trials – thorny challenges whose difficulty is pitched squarely at those who lapped up those that appeared in the original.

Despite the freewheeling variety on offer, drabness can still strike at certain moments



Sly 3 sees the series hitting its comic stride. New characters have a design so vibrantly garish that they threaten to make the game's trio of heroes seem dull





Some twoplayer modes are available from the off, but others must be unlocked. They include as a highlight a *Robotron*-inspired shoot 'em up taken from *Sly 2*'s hacking mode

throughout the main campaign, with goals wavering from the very start, from the delightful (Bentley's scouring of paintings for hidden codes, for example) to the stilted (a rote to-and-fro boss scrap). And, of course, they're never less than polished. Plenty of them, to the benefit of the story, feature multiple characters working together, allowing the minigames to feel even more relentless as control switches between Sly and his team. Given that *Sly 3*'s plot is the strongest so far, it's a worthy change of pace.

It's a game that feels like bits of lots of other games you've played before, but not in this order, rarely within such a sure-footed framework and never presented with such a crisp gloss of cartoon-quality production; and it's all bunched up together more tightly and enjoyably than in *Sly 2*. It's an extravagant, fan-pleasing package that rivals *Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory*'s generosity of game modes in breadth of content. Even if those escapades can seem generic, *Sly 3* confidently retains the series' tradition of excellence of execution above everything else. **[7]**





While the clue bottles may have been removed, safe-cracking is still present, thanks to a simple but pleasing rotation of the analogue stick. There are plenty of more demanding things to unlock, though, such as the videos earned from the Master Thief trials





A new addition to Sly's repertoire is the Wall Hook, a manoeuvre that allows him to utilise certain crannies – as indicated by the puff of blue sparkles that appear on any useable in-game object – to slingshot himself upwards

Eye max



Sly 3's 3D aspect takes place in two contexts. Sections of Story mode offer the option to wear bundled 3D glasses; secondly, a number of sections can be replayed in this colourless but depth-filled perspective. These are at their strongest when providing a striking depth to the hazards and environments Sly tackles. Combat doesn't hold up as well, and looks a fuzzed-up mess. Curiously, the specs bundled with the US retail code feel shoddy and fragile next to those given out by Sony during the game's preview tour.



THE SUFFERING: TIES THAT BIND

FORMAT: PC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED) XBOX PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OCT 28 (UK), OUT NOW (US)
PUBLISHER: MIDWAY DEVELOPER: SURREAL SOFTWARE



The many moaning, taunting, mumbling and gibbering samples often overlap, making subtitles a must. The audio prompts for each of the enemies are usefully distinct, though

Moral examination



Most games that attempt to include morality end up fudging it in some regard or other, as they try to shoehorn a complex set of ideas into gameplay that just won't support the required delicacy or complexity. The karmic element of *Ties That Bind* is so characteristically heavy-handed as to be immune to illogic: stumble across an innocent and you can protect, kill or desert them, in obvious ways, with results that have obvious bearings on your moral barometer.

Horror must come second only to comedy in terms of dependence on good timing. Prescripted scares are a temperamental science, but one that definitely breaks down due to overexposure. *Ties That Bind* doesn't bother with any finesse, instead flinging ghost-train scares at the player like a metronome in the hope that some of them will get under your skin. There are scripted terrors at virtually every corner and confrontation: a heartbeat of gory imagery, a flashback to former tragedies, an apparition with a tortured voice or some scuttling terror shuffling past an opening in the near-distance. But then *The Suffering* was a game with anything but a light touch.

Still, this relentless procession of frights, however clumsy, is a fitting element. There's more than a hint of *Silent Hill*'s hellishness to the sheer, inexplicable overkill of death and insanity that plagues hero Torque's world. It's an overpowering and omnipresent madness, which makes the appearance of the heavy-duty human troopers in the game – a clichéd third party of gunmen who appear between Torque and the demons he fights with, but are allied to neither – all the more jarring, as coordinated SWAT-style radio chatter echoes among the electrified flames, macabre ghosts and bloody corridors.



Despite the dual-wielding (above), both guns are triggered by a single button. Grenades, including Molotovs, are readily available via a shoulder button

Aside from this, its action feels eerily similar to that of the original, as does its palette, which rarely sees any light besides Torque's flashlight. And despite his journey taking him out of prison into the streets of Baltimore, it's a place that feels no less narrow, confined or linear than the original.

Still, there's solidity here in the game's simple, punchy shooting, and the fact that it can be played comfortably from either first- or thirdperson. And while the game's look is roughshod, its reds, browns and limited use of light come together at just the right time – when the player is being assaulted by one of the game's creepily imaginative creatures.

Ties That Bind makes use of two weapon slots, which causes weapon changes out of necessity rather than preference. And the removal of the ability to store healing items is a mistake, forcing players to break off from a fight and hunt for energy when near death. But being able to access Torque's flashlight with just a click of the right stick is useful.

After the interesting and confident debut of *The Suffering* last year, *Ties That Bind* remains a straightforward action game, and one with a coherent story that feels well paced, if too full of schlocky cliché for some. But that is, ultimately, all it does: remains. **[5]**



With the game's gunplay feeling so frank and uncomplicated, any instant satisfaction can easily degenerate into dullness. However well crafted and gross the enemies, there are only so many times each can be fought before they begin to feel like mindless fodder





The story of *Ties That Bind* may not be as involving or effective as, say, *Fatal Frame II*, but there *is* one at least, backed by a rich archive of information, and one that unfolds through what feel like your efforts, not cutscenes



BUZZ! THE MUSIC QUIZ

FORMAT: PS2 **PRICE:** £40 (INCLUDING BUZZERS)
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** SCEE
DEVELOPER: RELENTLESS **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E151, E153, E155

For developers, there are three key steps along the road to greatness. The first is to make something that people will want to buy: this makes your game a success. The second is to make something that people will play to the end: this proves your game is good. The third is to make something that people will come back to time and time again: what better indicator is there for a truly exceptional experience?

Buzz! shouldn't have the slightest problem getting people to buy it. It's an extraordinary bargain, for a start: a big fat box with a game and four controllers with light-up buttons and yards and yards of cable and a neat little Velcro tie so it doesn't end up as a knotted snarl. And the premise is simple and instantly appealing: a quiz show in your living room, complete with smart-aleck host and a fastest finger first round.

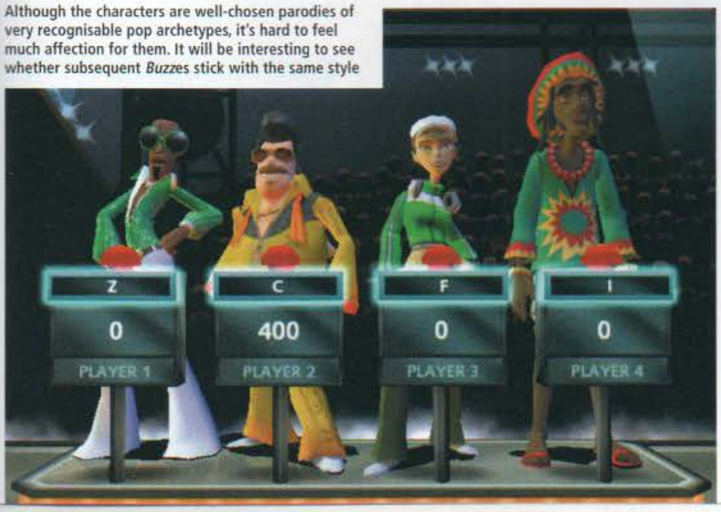
Nor should it have much difficulty in encouraging players to see it through to the end. The novelty of the buzzers is highly entertaining, the music questions teeter perfectly on the obscure side of pop general knowledge, and there's not too much in the way of unskippable window-dressing. Different match lengths, from the throwaway to the marathon, mean you can kill half an hour or settle in for an evening, and the differing round designs mean it avoids monotony. Proof, then, this is a good videogame.

But great? While *Buzz!* can't be beaten on its instant appeal or its short-term gratification, it's impossible to shake the feeling that this is disposable gaming. There are too many shortcomings to establish it as a staple. The setting, for instance, despite being appropriately familiar for a mainstream game, is strangely sterile. Some game variants – particularly the booby-trapped Pass The Bomb round – are poorly designed, and the lack of any indication of progress through each match sorely undermines the sense of excitement. Moreover, the cover version music clips, though mostly strong, can be an enormous frustration on the occasions when they simply sound not very much like the originals.

Disposable isn't necessarily a bad thing, of course. This isn't a game setting out to become a revered classic, but an accessible piece of entertainment. And there's no fear of obsolescence, since once the shine has come off *The Music Quiz*, the general knowledge, sport and movie versions will be on their way. But the frustration with *Buzz!* is that with a bit more life, and a better designed structure, it might have managed to be both. **[6]**



For those who start to tire of the rather choppy pace of the main game, a Quickfire mode, tucked away on the Extras menu, gives players a rapid-fire roster of up to a hundred questions in a row



Although the characters are well-chosen parodies of very recognisable pop archetypes, it's hard to feel much affection for them. It will be interesting to see whether subsequent *Buzz*es stick with the same style



TONY HAWK'S AMERICAN WASTELAND

FORMAT: GC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED)
PRICE: £40 **RELEASE:** OCTOBER 28 **PUBLISHER:** ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: NEVERSOFT **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E151, E154



The comparative visual shoddiness of the games in the *Tony Hawk* series has become a sorer point with each iteration. *THAW* is no different – its cinematics are more smoothly produced, but remain distinctly unimpressive. Certain comic-styled cutscenes are a colourful and crisp relief, however

Classic Mode, sadly, feels weak, and a less enjoyable distraction than in *THUG 2*. Your skater's run animation has improved to make speedy on-foot travel less unwieldy. Backflips and wall-runs are well-integrated parts of the control scheme, bringing a bit of variety to a combo run





The title is just painfully apt: never has a free-roaming structure brought so little to improve the quality of a game's world. The mooted open-ended environments of *Tony Hawk's American Wasteland* feel like a fallacy, a bleak repackaging for hocking the game to a jaded audience. Each of the game's key areas – themed on prominent US locations, but built from the same urban kitbag as the *THUG* games – feels much like any other self-contained *Tony Hawk's* stage. The obvious tunnels that connect them even stutter slightly as the player moves through them, as the next part of the world is streamed in. In terms of the freshness that a truly expansive gameworld – a whole state dedicated to skate – could potentially bring to the series, there's an intense feeling of disappointment.

But. *But.* It's just impossible to resist. With the distaste still fresh in your mouth, you listen obligingly as the game reels out the new tricks it's jammed into its already immense repertoire – some sensible, some outrageous, some desperate – and you can't help but at least give them a whirl. This is how the past two *THUG* games seem to have worked – despite the ugliness, despite the fratboy plotlines, you take a sniff of the bait in the form of new combo ingredient, and you're hooked, too busy linking and improvising and landing cleanly to care about the game's horrifically rough presentation or its clumsy objectives.

Jamming an already busy pad with even more functions, *THAW* still doesn't collapse under the weight of so much extra agility: mid-spin Natas techniques, boned ollies, wall runs and flips, caveman somersaults, board launches, rail stalls, Bert spins and banks transfers are all added, somehow, with little intrusion. Some feel like deadweight gimmicks, some feel like genuinely useful new techniques, but none of them feel like they add to the boarding as fundamentally as the changes in past games. Even the inclusion of BMX side-missions and goals fail to truly exercise the sensation of familiarity.

For anyone disillusioned with the series, *THAW* will do nothing. But for those who've stuck with the series without fail, endlessly chipping away at that combo ceiling, *THAW* is another blank canvas of opportunity ripe for exploitation and sketching out your own personal lines of smug achievement. **[6]**



ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN

FORMAT: GC, PC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: TREYARCH, BEENOX (PC) PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E154

All right, who do we have to blame for this? Is it comic book author and illustrator Brian Michael Bendis, whose story of a younger, less able webslinger may have influenced more than just the art and circumstance of Treyarch's promising spin-off? Or did a purse-holder at Activision one day grapple fruitlessly with the last game's control system and scrawl in their subsequent notes: "Make the next one so that *I* can play it"? Speculation aside, someone sure messed up Spider-Man.

Ultimate has you simultaneously ruing and lamenting change. While very little has been done to improve the flawed freeform structure of the otherwise splendid *Spider-Man 2*, Treyarch hasn't shied from meddling with that game's fluent movement system, forcefully extolling a compensatory technique of double-jumps and web-zips in lieu of dual web swings and charge jumps. Make no mistake, there's still an innate thrill to the act of swinging via webs that actually connect to something, but there's no longer any grace. As for double-jumping: as useful as it can be during those moments when a swing falls shorter than expected, it also



Venom brings a fresh set of moves and techniques to the game, along with a neat notoriety-centred freeplay mode unlocked once the story is over

bounces you away from walls rather than up them – a design error that quickly and then habitually makes its presence felt.

As further evidence of its mixed-up agenda, *Ultimate* has given both its races and painfully tedious 'combat tours' greater significance during the sandbox bridges in its storyline, apparently oblivious to the fact that its compromised movement scheme makes them even less enjoyable than before. The cutscenes that frequently interrupt the game's barrage of disappointments at least prove that its artistic direction has taken it somewhere worthwhile, but elsewhere even this proves bittersweet. Within the invisible walls that segregate the play area from its deceptively illustrated periphery, too much detail has been shed by the move to cel-shading to prevent buildings both near and far degenerating into muddied ambiguity. The series has retained just enough of last year's spark to survive this episode, but it seems the venom has run deeper than the adverts would have us believe. **[5]**



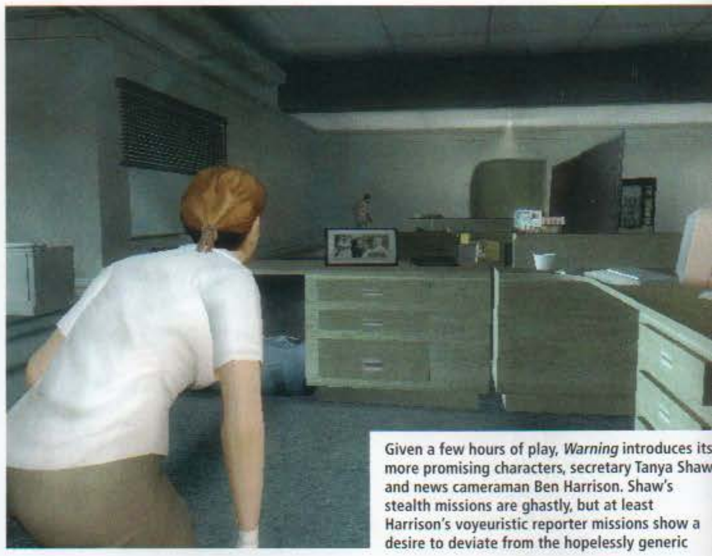


Boss battles are more plentiful than before, but also dumber and less engaging. Preceding chases offer further opportunity to curse the game's new controls



WITHOUT WARNING

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £35
RELEASE: OCTOBER 28 PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
DEVELOPER: CIRCLE STUDIO PREVIOUSLY IN: E152

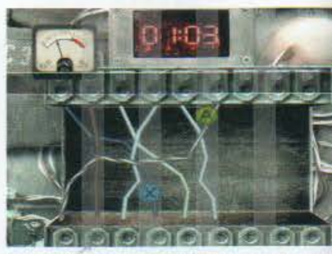


Given a few hours of play, *Warning* introduces its more promising characters, secretary Tanya Shaw and news cameraman Ben Harrison. Shaw's stealth missions are ghastly, but at least Harrison's voyeuristic reporter missions show a desire to deviate from the hopelessly generic

Isn't Circle just the most allegorical name? In the case of Circle Studio, for instance, it could just as easily refer to the hermetically sealed sphere that keeps creative minds high on the stale air of yesteryear as it could the cyclical process of making mistakes and learning nothing from them. By any standards that have existed during the last ten years, *Without Warning* is a work of stultifying incompetence that seems to hate its own players. Stumbling drunkenly back and forth about a 24-inspired timeline, it uses its six characters (three soldiers, a cop, a cameraman and a secretary) to work in all manner of design clichés, none of which do anything to enliven its exhausting pattern of play.

Unless you class the possession of unflagging patience as such a thing, the game's dominant gunfights require absolutely no skill. Every flicked switch, spoken word and trodden footstep in *Without Warning* seems to double as an excuse to send a dozen identikit terrorists (drawn from an army of thousands that could just as soon build itself a bog-standard chemical plant as invade one) into whichever identikit room you inhabit at the time. Beyond the numbing repetitiveness of it all, the problem here is that you commonly gain awareness of an enemy's presence only by being shot, at which point the reticle hints at their position and you perform a merry dance while bashing at the lock-on button. If one of those incoming shots happens to be an RPG, then it's back to the beginning of the level to enjoy it all again.

Thanks to the insulting subgames, vulgar stereotyping, grossly implemented stealth missions, graphical malfunctions, and breakdowns in common sense that characterise the rest of *Without Warning*, there's plenty to keep you entertained while you recount its failings to friends and other victims (arguably a pastime with more mileage than the game itself). Capcom, however, probably won't be joining in. Unless its marketing men can work some powerful magic, this pilot mission in deliberate westernisation might just inspire a humiliating strategic withdrawal. **[3**



Memory tests, rhythm challenges, and similarly inane so-called 'puzzles' serve to complicate (read that as 'lengthen') objectives such as bomb defusal, electronic hacking and lock-picking. As the game labours on, so repetition is employed to mask the lack of genuine challenge



GRIPSHIFT

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£22) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: SIDHE INTERACTIVE PREVIOUSLY IN: E151

Put aside the cars for a moment, because racing is the least of what *GripShift* is about. Though surely an ode to Geoff Crammond's seminal *Stunt Car Racer*, the game owes an equal amount to *Super Monkey Ball*, replacing *Stunt Car*'s coaster-ribbon with all its accompanying teetering-on-the-void peril.

GripShift is really three games in one, each track offering separate tasks for its full completion, all requiring three unique styles of play: standard full-throttle speed-runs will gain you bronze, silver and gold medals, precision control and a modicum of exploration will net you the total amount of scattered stars, and nothing short of reckless abandon and blind leaps of faith are necessary to find each level's hidden GS token. This mix of styles not only ensures but mandates the game's rewarding longevity – each higher class of track is unlockable only by completing the majority of the previous one's goals, requiring the player to perfect techniques without which the following courses would be all but impossible, and giving the game an ideal pacing to reward this mastery.

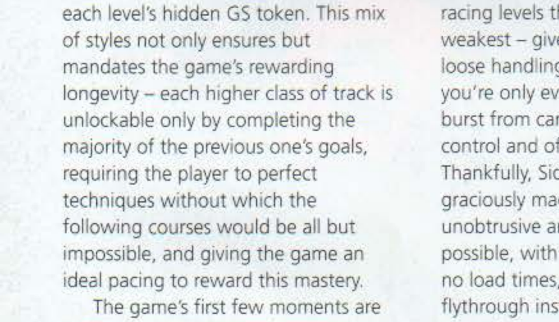
The game's first few moments are initially among its most frustrating, as the vehicle physics initially seem just this side of too light and imprecise, but as course objectives blossom beyond traditional hairpin turns and begin to require jumps across impossibly wide chasms, the relative weightlessness reveals itself part of gratifying aerial manoeuvrability. It's then, too, that the smartness of the level design comes into full view – where a bump in the road isn't just an opportunity for a brief stomach-lurching airtime thrill, but rather in most cases an intentionally crafted stepping stone to unexplored territory, and where every self-congratulating moment of seemingly clever exploitation reveals itself to be premeditated requirement.

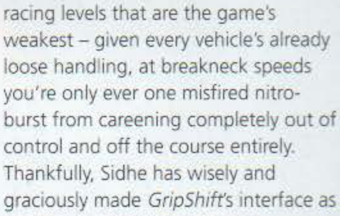


***GripShift*'s physics have been finely tuned to allow for in-air manoeuvres, which you'll make full use of throughout the course of the game, turbo-boost gliding hundreds of feet to safety and abruptly air-braking to drop to waypoints below**

Curiously, it's the straightforward racing levels that are the game's weakest – given every vehicle's already loose handling, at breakneck speeds you're only ever one misfired nitro-burst from careening completely out of control and off the course entirely. Thankfully, Sidhe has wisely and graciously made *GripShift*'s interface as unobtrusive and immediate as possible, with level restarts requiring no load times, and initial setup and flythrough instantly dismissible, giving even the game's most frustrating challenges a compulsive just-one-more-try quality.

With single- and multiplayer minigames – and, more interestingly, a fully self-contained production-quality construction kit supporting a viral and burgeoning custom-level trading community – round off an already complete package, making *GripShift* one of the PSP's finest and full-featured games to date. **[7]**





Race sections function as a lite version of the standard kart-racing formula. Three power-ups – missile, bomb, and shield – are available, but the greater hazard is miscalculating the handling



JAK X

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: £40 RELEASE: NOVEMBER 4
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: NAUGHTY DOG

On the surface, it would be easy to construe *Jak X* as a desperate measure, of an adventure series so diffuse in its mish-mash collection of action elements that it has spun itself into a spin-off to continue in any meaningful manner. The actuality of *Jak X*, however, feels not so much desperate as something that's not as unwelcome as expected.

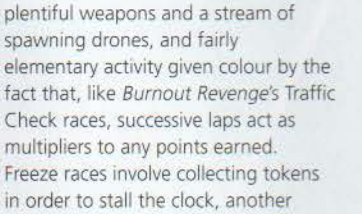
What appears to be a rudimentary mix of the simplistic tracks and straightforward weaponry of a kart racer, along with the aggressive destruction and acceleration of latter-day *Burnout*s, also turns out to provide something more creditable than first appears. Several race modes embody this veiled depth of design: Death Race is a straightforward shoot 'em up, of plentiful weapons and a stream of spawning drones, and fairly elementary activity given colour by the fact that, like *Burnout Revenge*'s Traffic Check races, successive laps act as multipliers to any points earned. Freeze races involve collecting tokens in order to stall the clock, another seemingly rote task enlivened by the fact that they don't respawn on subsequent laps, coercing the player into choosing their pick-ups with some consideration.

The controls lack the edge of subtlety to make the game as consuming as it is palatable, but the tracks – although basic – lend themselves very well to the game's powersliding system. But its races fall foul of that pitfall of combat racing – the pack is tightly knit to promote constant battling, meaning that just one explosion will slingshot the player from first to last, and rarely anything in between. There are peripheral bugbears, too, like the sporadically invasive race commentator and a bodywork-modifying element whose results feel inane.

If this is the series' PS2 swansong, it goes out in the luxurious manner in which the series was born – in a well-produced, moderately thoughtful and firmly enjoyable instalment of an established genre – a manner that won't go unappreciated but will just as likely go unremembered. **[6**



***Jak X*'s production values are typically lofty, ranging from the game's however misplaced cutscenes, to deep seams of unlockables and cheats, to the atypical technical treats of widescreen, surround sound and progressive sca support on PS2. Past *Jak* saves, along with a link-up to *Daxter* on PSP, will unlock extra content**



A number of the weapons launched from the rea of Jak's buggy can be used to deflect incoming missiles, if deployed with proper timing. The precision required has been relaxed somewhat for the final code from its preview state, an essential touch allowing the player to multitask their use of power-ups and buggy handling





REBELSTAR: TACTICAL COMMAND

FORMAT: GBA PRICE: $20 (£11) RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: NAMCO DEVELOPER: CODO GAMES



***Rebelstar*'s weaponry remains as diverse as ever, but the new levelling system requires skills in class-based categories for their effective usage. Expect to suffer many near-miss shots without the proper training for each class**

Clearly inspired by the handheld successes of the *Wars* and *Emblem* series, *Tactical Command* is the Gollop Brothers' attempt to bring their brand of squadron strategy to the diminutive screen. Stripped by necessity to its basest form to allow for the limited inputs of the handheld, and this time greatly enhanced and personalised by character artist Gez Fry's gorgeous anime-inspired designs, *Rebelstar* may be their most accessible title to date.

What it might lack in stature, committed as it is purely to battles, it compensates for in strategic sanctity and innovation, offering the same fully destructible scenery and overwatch features as its PC brethren, and adding an experience-based class-specific levelling system, requiring far more forethought regarding equipment and deployment than previously necessary.

Unfortunately, the technological and strategic achievement comes at the cost of glossy finish. Though more explicitly narrative than its predecessors, apart from a few



scattered in-mission dialogue sequences, the majority of *Rebelstar*'s storyline is woven through rough-cut and reed-thin static-screen sequences, each reduced to a small handful of flatly delivered lines, by characters who rarely display identities and motivations deeper than their weapons specialities.

Obviously pushing the GBA to its processing limits, the game's flow frequently grinds to a slow chug when numerous units are simultaneously deployed, especially on enemy turns, which, though they work wonders for raising tension and allow you time to nervously second and third guess your troop positioning, often feel as though they stretch on far too long, and wrongly focus onscreen activity (displaying one squad member while playing the sounds of another being shot). Most egregiously, a mission-halting bug rears its head midway through (avoid it by eliminating hive eggs with only a melee weapon).

But these presentational problems can't outshadow the finest strategic outing the Game Boy has seen since its own signature franchises, and the game is a must-play for any newcomer to, or longtime fan of, the Gollops. **[7]**



The first moments of *Rebelstar* are nostalgia at its finest, with a grizzled and battle-hardened Corporal Jonlan training new recruit Jorel



CALL OF CTHULHU: DARK CORNERS OF THE EARTH

FORMAT: XBOX PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES DEVELOPER: HEADFIRST

A firstperson adventure game, while not being a unique proposition, is certainly an odd experience. Identifying with the character doing the sleuthing is harder, the temptation to view it as a slightly more elaborate *Myst* difficult to dismiss. And *Dark Corners Of The Earth* makes things even tougher for itself by clearing the HUD and introducing weapons too late to help cement the experience. But feeling divorced from the experience is not the game's worst horror.

Lurching from puzzle solving to stealth to FPS combat to platforming, *Dark Corners Of The Earth* wants to do everything but fails to do any of them well. The 'sneak' sections are particularly poor and see you waiting in shadows and observing the boring patrols of enemies for what seems an age. Once guns are acquired you feel less helpless, but the combat is awkward with enemies reacting poorly to hits and a compulsory manual reload that is ponderous beyond belief. In trying to make the game realistic, Headfirst has grievously shot itself in the foot.

This is epitomised in the game's take on healing, with specific hit locations requiring sutures, bandages and stitching. The idea that an eye



The platforming sections see you jumping across window ledges and over large holes in floorboards. Most drops will kill you instantly; lesser ones will break your legs – something that can be fixed with splints and bandages (above)

wound makes your world go hazy is neat enough, but in practice having to remedy it in the middle of a gun battle is frustrating and ridiculous. There are some decent puzzles, but the over-emphasis on reading reams of diary entries and listening to hackneyed dialogue for clues palls very quickly. Worse are illogical moments where the game refuses to let you press on until an obscure event has been triggered.

Dark Corners Of The Earth is not broken beyond repair, and there's cleverness evident with some genuinely thorny, well-thought-out conundrums, but the action elements are generally shocking. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to endear a new generation to H P Lovecraft's peculiar and brilliant brand of horror. **[4**





Spot something vaguely frightening and a sanity effect can kick in. This usually consists of your world going a bit woozy, putting you off your aim and generally provoking you into cursing the game for its obstinate design ethos



FRANTIX

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: £20 RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), DEC (UK)
PUBLISHER: SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: KILLER GAME



Frantix's overbearing architecture and design clouds and confuses the action. Switching to the overhead view, mimicking block-puzzlers past, makes matters worse by cutting off information

Killer Game's first portable effort follows so closely the same esteemed decades-long vein of traditional block-puzzle games that there would seem to be little it could do wrong, so long as it played by numbers. And *Frantix* brings the tradition up to date as one of the most beautiful and intricately created renditions of its kind, window-dressed with lavish organic themes that belie and conceal its basic grid structure.

What's most disappointing then is how the very lushness of the levels becomes the game's ultimate downfall. Seemingly conflicted between delivering next-gen graphical impact and providing immediately recognisable objectives, Killer Game errs on the side of form over function, and in turn stumbles through a laundry list of poor design decisions. Gratuitous scenery, architecture and excessive environmental flair consistently obscure pathways, items, and – most unforgivably, especially in highly time-constrained situations – level exits. Similarly and inconspicuously coloured switches for various functions are labelled only with minuscule icons, indistinguishable from one another at all but the most inconveniently tight camera angles. An unwillingness to contain levels within or otherwise design them to the PSP's widescreen view places necessary objects far outside the level's starting view; as a result, most levels require endless trial-and-error dry-run hunts to scout out a plan of attack before finally attempting to actually solve them, in every case never feeling like playful experimentation so much as unnecessary and burdensome trekking.

The hallmark of successful puzzle games of this type is in creating a simple set of emblematic building blocks and, throughout the course of the game, toying with ever more deviously clever exploitations of the system. Even in the precious few instances that *Frantix* comes closest to fully realising this, the tedious number of bland levels required to get there saps most of the energy from the discovery. While the game does contain a massive amount of levels and playtime, and successfully supplies quick-burst pick-up-and-play appeal, the play itself is ultimately uninspired enough to leave *Frantix* easily and understandably overlooked. **[4]**



Frantix is not without its share of genuinely clever gameplay, but its system is so decontextualised and obtuse that it's a stream of trial-and-error. Never are you fully confident of what the next switch might do



TAMAGOTCHI NO PUCHIPUCHI OMISECCHI

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £25 RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: BANDAI DEVELOPER: NANA ON SHA

The career of Nana On Sha makes for demoralising reading. It's nearly ten years since the release of *Parappa The Rapper*, the game which brought the developer to the attention of the world, as well as redefining rhythm-action and revitalising 2D's visual style. Since then, its sequels have attracted steadily declining audiences. The *Vib Ribbon* series, after the monochrome magic of the original, fell out of view as it explored the gaming potential of calligraphy and photography rather than gratingly exuberant J-pop. Now comes a Tamagotchi game for Bandai – a licensed kids' game in the place of genre-defying originality.

It would be a great end to the story to say that this is the perfect hybrid: a blockbusting licence which would return Nana On Sha's extraordinary imagination to the forefront of gamer's minds. Sadly, it's not quite the case. The art style is just as stunning. Its uglifying twist on super-cute 2D ensures the world retains a sense of vitality and individuality, rather than lapsing into something saccharine and anodyne. And the premise for the game – that, rather than playing nursemaid to a rather uncharismatic creature, you must run a chain of corner shops, building a commercial empire by tending to the needs of the townsfolk – is a smart update to an outmoded craze.

But the meat of the game itself is repetitive and unrewarding. Although you'll be keeping shop in a wide variety of settings – dentist's surgeries, jewellers, bakeries, steam rooms – and

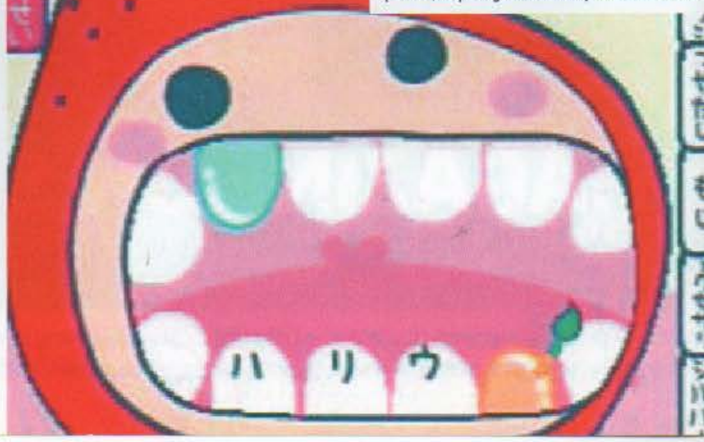


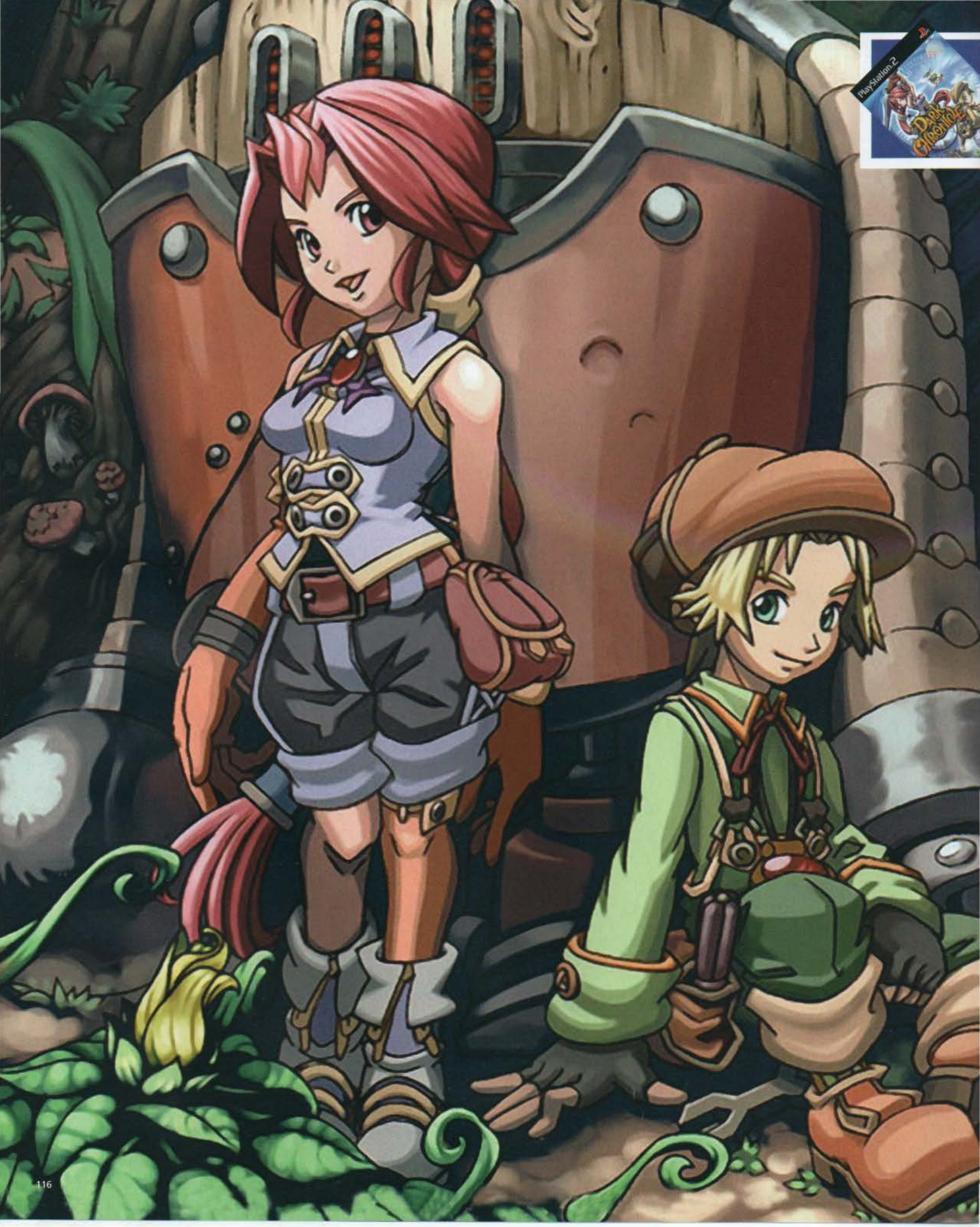
The same parade of facially misshapen villagers visits each of your shops, which helps give the game a sense of continuity and community even though you can't wander its streets and explore

watching them evolve into absurdly wonderful hybrids (the dental make-u shop has to be seen to be understood let alone believed), the tasks you do in them are banal. Although the touchscreen is usually a guarantee of entertaining interaction, dragging jewels onto a frame to create the necklace demanded by the customer, or selecting drink after drink to cater to the whims of your steam bathers, simply isn't rewarding, and there's littl or no progression in the tasks as your shops evolve and grow. It soon feels more like sweatshop labour than whimsical entertainment. The reward structure is also flatly mechanical, and the new items you unlock for your character – outfits and furniture for hi rather plain house – don't prove much of an incentive.

Even allowing for the very young audience that this game is looking to attract, there's little doubt that the Nana On Sha spark is missing. Beyond its visual appeal, this really is a Tamagotchi game at heart: repetitive, mechanical and hollow. **[4**

The simple process of drilling and brushing your clientele's teeth becomes more complex once your dentist's shop cross-breeds with a make-up parlour, requiring coloured laquers and tattoos




PlayStation.2
DARK CHRONICLE

TIME EXTEND

DARK CHRONICLE

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEI**
DEVELOPER: **LEVEL 5**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE DATE: **NOVEMBER 2002**





It asked an effort on a par with Harvest Moon, but was toil with plenty of spoils; resource management and RPG blended with a fine eye for art, if not for pacing

It's often hard to draw a line between being captivated by an RPG and just plain being made a captive of one. They are games which reel out all manner of demands for progress, some petulant, some repetitive and some ludicrously illogical. Yet even by the standards of this tradition, *Dark Chronicle*'s opening acts dropped an unusually hefty ransom note into the lap of the player, for while most RPGs ask you to save the world, *Dark Chronicle* asks you to rebuild it, brick by brick, century by century, random dungeon by random dungeon. It is an onerous task, but the candy-coated world you forge is as atypical as it is a typical, a mixture of norms and fresh ambitions – some sparkling and some monotone – but an intricate mixture nonetheless.

Taking around a dozen hours to truly find its stride – more a requirement than a grace where Japanese RPGs are concerned – *Dark Chronicle* unfolded its petals in a slow and laborious manner. It was thanks in part to the irritating-but-engrossing tendency of RPGs to not let the player know of the existence of some potentially deep and magnificent subquest until they're already deeply embroiled, but it's also due to the fact that *Dark Chronicle* is, in some ways, a distant relation of *Harvest Moon*. Gather, sow and reap: that's the core of *Dark Chronicle*, a studious collection and alchemy ethic of assembling resources and then combining them in strict recipes to create objects that form the furniture for a new world. A game where the player got to move mountains with some carefully placed molehills.

This core plays out via a series of Georamas, villages and settlements that need to be built in order to change the course of the future. This task is tackled through the cooperative efforts of Max and Monica, the juvenile heroes of the game, a squeaky-voiced duo whose irritating sweetness doesn't stick out due to a gameworld where even the fiercest weapon could appear adorable. And their first task is to gather – most raw materials needed for creating props and buildings are harvested from the game's dungeons, in the form of Geostones (the blueprints, effectively, for a village's contents) and elemental items (the building blocks that realise them). The dungeons themselves consisted of a fixed number of floors for a given area but were randomly generated, distributing enemies, items and other bobs in a different scatter each time the player returned. It's the game's most arduous grind, battling through floor after floor after floor of simple, wieldy combat in order to gather enough materials to make the next stage possible: the sowing. Each set of dungeons was attached to an area that needed to be revitalised in order to prevent the future hurtling towards disaster at the hands of a maniac. The Georamas are realised via a straightforward isometric city-building scheme of menus and object placement, made impressive by the fact that players could switch from the standard ground-level view into a bird's-eye perspective swiftly and seamlessly. Although narrow in scope, there was an intricacy here that led to the final, and most gratifying phase: reaping.

While most RPGs ask you to save the world, Dark Chronicle asks you to rebuild it, brick by brick, century by century, random dungeon by random dungeon

At any point during construction, the player could travel to the future to watch their efforts unfurl in striking fashion, not just in terms of architecture, but culture – as the





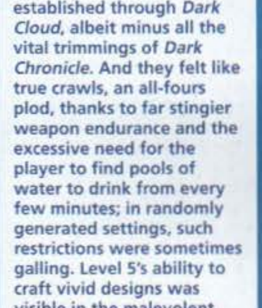
Photography was unnecessary for completing the game, but was far from insignificant. Several hundred objects could be snapped, while certain shots – known as Scoops – were precious and often only seen for fleeting moments





CLOUD AND CLEAR

The skeleton of *Dark Chronicle*, along with numerous vital organs, was present in its predecessor *Dark Cloud*, an early PS2 title. The nucleus of dungeon crawls and village management was established through *Dark Cloud*, albeit minus all the vital trimmings of *Dark Chronicle*. And they felt like true crawls, an all-fours plod, thanks to far stingier weapon endurance and the excessive need for the player to find pools of water to drink from every few minutes; in randomly generated settings, such restrictions were sometimes galling. Level 5's ability to craft vivid designs was visible in the malevolent but beautifully carved Dark Genie, showing a sharp eye for crisply cut characters, even if their skill in kneading the PS2's palette wasn't as ripe as it was in *Dark Chronicle*. Indeed, having proved its visual verve with *Dragon Quest VIII* – and looking to capitalise upon it for forthcoming PS2 title *Rogue Galaxy* – it makes the demise of True *Fantasy Live Online* for Xbox, just as Live was in ascendancy, even more annoying.



correct people were tempted to stay in the player's development, so their descendents would roam in the modified futurescape, often with a pivotal role to play, or maybe just a curious shop to run. The chronological side effects of the player's efforts weren't necessarily arresting in their logic, but were in representation: the towering workshops of the Gundorada weapons factory, the soft, dusky beauty of the Luna Labs, and the spectacular Jurak Mall, a tingling reminder of *Ocarina Of Time*'s Great Deku Tree. The overarching story was a cliché of fate and Armageddon; these localised tales, however, were evocative, pretty and gave the player a sense of meaningful contribution.

It was an empowerment that extended to the world itself, and not just the battlefield. It was the player being manipulated not by cutscenery theatrics, not swelling orchestras or cinematic conceits, but through their own manipulations. Plenty of RPGs have some intimidating amounts of freedom, but they're often ghettoised to some aspect of a character's attributes or some inventory checklist; by contrast, their locations, cast and direction feel inflexible, almost frozen. Environments in *Dark Chronicle* weren't pre-rendered, but post-rendered, as the player tinkered their way through each Georama. Strict rules were given for the completion of each – at least seven trees *here*, *this* person resides within *this* kind of building – but how they were achieved was down to your own take on town planning. It wasn't a tremendous freedom and, as the player came closer to realising the ideal future, so their options narrowed – but such restrictions paled when the player got to see the future being freed in such a tangible manner.

This feeling of limited liberation extended to the game's weapons, which players were charged with crafting according to strictly predefined templates. Items would be synthesised, extracting properties from them according to some typical categories – flame, exorcism, chill, cyclone, etc – to be added to each weapon to enhance and strengthen it. The tree diagram accompanying the possible paths of evolution for each of the game's weapons is a dizzying sight, but the design of the arsenal was never anything less than vivid, with hammers, swords and machine

The tree diagram accompanying the possible paths of evolution for each of the game's weapons is a dizzying sight, but the design of the arsenal was never less than vivid

guns built from strong, chunky colour and with even more colourful names. Indeed, this is one of *Dark Chronicle*'s themes. Consider the following hallmark of most Zelda or Mario games: whatever nook the player sought out or stumbled upon, whatever combination of abilities they experimented with, it was impossible to shake the feeling that the designer had gotten there first and left a treat for the player in terms of a reaction or secret. In *Dark Chronicle*, it's as if the game's artists had got there first, if not its designers, with a childish, toy-like charm in all but its most threatening of boss behemoths, and a celebration of cheerful hues in every new location.

And there were a *lot* of nooks to *Dark Chronicle*, and a profusion of peripheral details. It was a game that, arguably, had as much content as *Vice City*, albeit a game whose deepest, most secret corners required



Max's Ridepod – named Steve – is an attack vehicle essential for slaying larger enemies. It could be equipped with blades, guns, feet, tracks and all manner of clown clothes. Plus, of course, a maddening voicebox that turned Steve into a tedious smack-talker







To call *Dark Chronicle*'s soundtrack twee is an understatement, but for all that it fits perfectly with the fairytale charm of it all, and is never less than warm and tuneful

even more painstaking diligence to extract. Spheda (golf), fishing, fish breeding, fish racing, monster captures and transforms, photography, inventions, medal collections, weaponsmithing and the recruiting of many back-up characters – RPG staples one and all, but in *Dark Chronicle* they're all brought together in such a way as to keep the player besotted with the sensation of there being so much to do.

It was a game that, taken from opening to ending in minimal time, was a shamefaced slog, but one that could be broken up with a multitude of tasty snack breaks for however long the player wished. The omnipresence of these distractions – not to mention the achingly idyllic setting of it all – made for something that bordered on pastoral, of gameworld as empty field, fertilised by the player's efforts. And, despite the doom-fuelled necessity of Max and Monica's adventures, there was something unerringly laidback about it all, something that's again connected to the childlike nature of the game and its protagonists. It could often be a trudge, sure, but it was *yours*, and was rendered in a rainbow-bright palette that too many present-day videogames don't have the time or energy to go near. *Dark Chronicle*'s world was built from gingerbread houses, a chocolate factory of eye candy.

RPGs in general seem to be about inhabiting worlds and affecting them via characters that grow in strength and ability through a series of proving grounds loosely linked by a narrative. *Dark Chronicle* was much more, and demanded much more. It was true labour, a game with a staunch work ethic, but its rewards were well in excess of minimum wage. An utterly complete and exhausted *Dark Chronicle* save file is some 200 hours old, and much likely rarer than a 100 per cent conquest of *GTA: San Andreas*. But, while much of *Dark Chronicle* was a game about collection, it gave the player a sense of completion at every step of their journey within the mini-dramas of each Georama, with their own closed and complete adventures. And because of that unusual sense of consequence and impact, it offers its players the rarest of roles in a roleplaying game – right at the heart of the story: just because *Dark Chronicle* is Max and Monica's adventure, it doesn't mean it can't be yours, too.

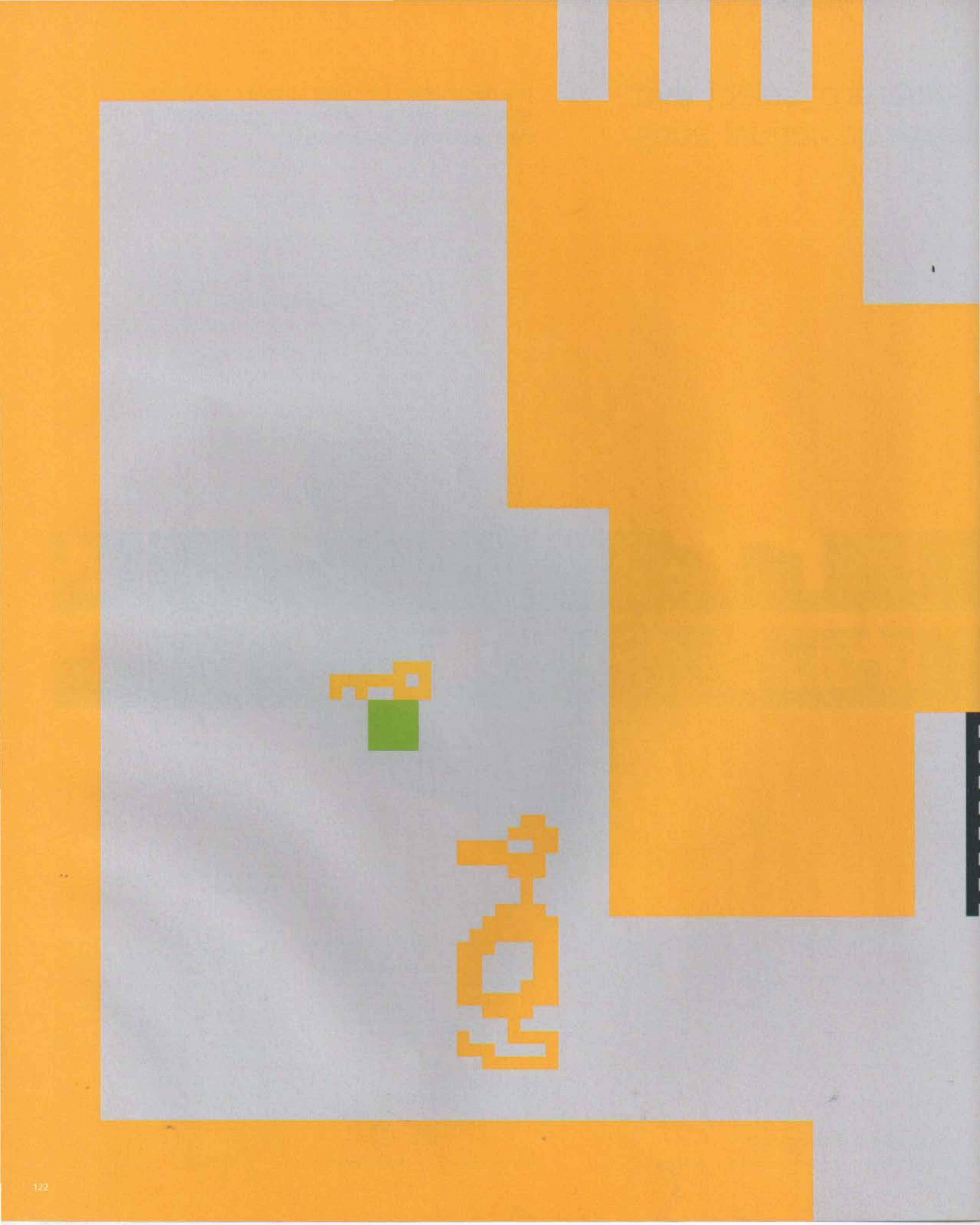




INVENT-ARRAY

Maximillian's profession, aside from global salvation, is that of an inventor, with his skill allowing him to combine 'ideas' in order to develop blueprints for new items and weapons. These 'ideas' came from photographs taken of the gameworld, with useful snapshots accompanied by a short chime and description to signify their worth: Max then chooses three from his collection to blend into a new invention. The problem with these discoveries was that their logic was fuzzy to the point of uselessness, with the player having to rely on explicit combinations explained in-game than on experimentation. Like the photography subquest itself, it wasn't a truly essential part of play, but still provided a significant amount of content for those willing to indulge it.





THE MAKING OF... ADVENTURE

At console gaming's dawn, inspired by a popular text-based game, one man set about laying some important foundations...

FORMAT: **ATARI VCS** PUBLISHER: **ATARI** DEVELOPER: **WARREN ROBINETT** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE DATE: **1979**

"When I got the job at Atari, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Getting paid to write videogames! I'd expected to be fighting in the Vietnamese jungle."

Warren Robinett didn't go to Vietnam. The war ended during his senior year and, at 26, he found himself with a degree in Computer Applications To Language And Art and a Masters in Computer Science from the University of California at Berkley – qualifications which ideally prepared him for entering the fledgling videogame industry, long before academia considered it a viable career.

It wasn't to be the last time Robinett seemed blessed with an uncanny prescience. While at Atari, he produced *Adventure*, the original graphical adventure game, with objects to manipulate, mazes to traverse, enemy AI to outwit and secrets to uncover, and thus laid the foundations for one of videogaming's richest genres. But first, he had to be thrown in at the deep end.

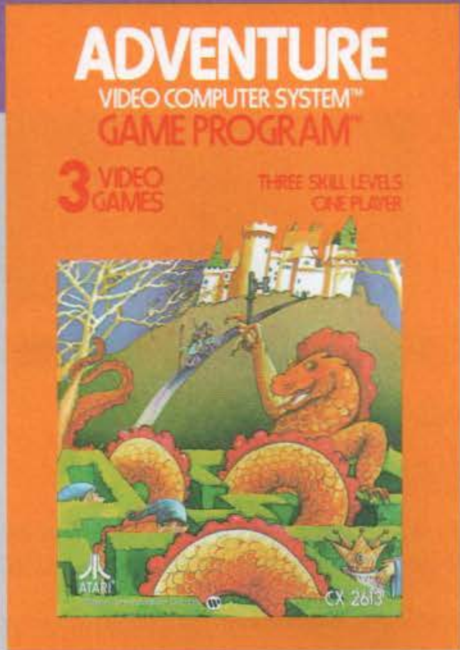
"I started at Atari in 1977," he recalls, "and on day one my boss, Larry Kaplan [who would go on to co-found Activision], said: 'Your job is to design videogames. Design one'."

With an office, an Atari VCS, a manual, some youthful enthusiasm and little else, the learning curve was steep. Robinett openly admits that his first completed game, *Slot Racers*, wasn't a glorious debut. "It wouldn't have made it over the bar if there'd been one back then, but Atari were desperate for product and would publish anything that the designers handed them."

However, with a published title to his name and fortified with the unique 'on the job' training this had provided, Robinett embarked on something altogether more ambitious.

"It was 1978 and everyone was going crazy for this text game called *Adventure*. I played it at Stanford Artificial Intelligence Lab where a friend worked, and just thought it was the coolest thing I'd ever seen. I needed a new project and you could basically do what the hell you wanted at Atari, so I started to figure out how I could transliterate the ideas of a text adventure to a videogame."

Some elements seemed to have a logical equivalent. Movement within a location could be handled by the joystick. Rooms could be represented using the entire screen to create a



Typical of VCS cartridges, *Adventure*'s boxart bore little resemblance to actual game content. The golden crown and blue-hatted pixies were strangely absent from the game, but the Puff the Magic Dragon pastiche certainly has an enduring charm

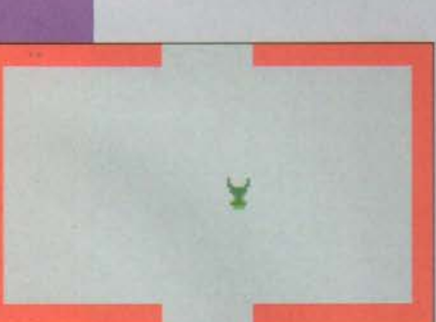


JOIN OUR CLUB

After former colleagues had left Atari to form Activision and Imagic, Robinett (above) and his fellow programmers Jim Huether and Tom Reuterdahl pondered their lot over six pitchers of beer.

"All these guys had been our co-workers and now were filthy rich. How come they were millionaires and we were still on $20,000? Were we morons? So we formed the Dumb Shits Club. The requirement for membership was you had to have designed videogames for Atari and never made any money from it."

Robinett's post-Atari career included setting up The Learning Company (which pioneered the development of educational software and was purchased in 1995 for $600 million) and working as a researcher in virtual reality and nanotechnology for NASA, the University of North Carolina, and Hewlett Packard. We conclude that his membership of the club does not require renewal.



The Enchanted Chalice looped through the 2600's colour palette to dazzling effect. Now to get it back to your castle past that thieving bat

map-like overview of the gameworld. 'GO NORTH' could be replicated by moving your character off the screen, and objects could be represented by icons. Yet others needed more careful consideration.

"I initially created an inventory screen, but to freeze the game just didn't feel right. It needed to be in realtime. One of my best decisions was to restrict your inventory to one item, which meant that within the graphical confines of the 2600 I could show what you were carrying on screen at the same time as your man."

The one-item limit also introduced the player to some rudimentary game strategies. Should you hold on to the key to get into the castle, or arm yourself with the sword to fight off the marauding dragons? Or perhaps tactical use of the magnet could attract them both? The kind of player choices still seen in *Halo*'s two-weapon limit or *The Legend Of Zelda*'s object-orientated puzzling were being established here. And these choices were given a greater frisson when made within a living, breathing gameworld.

"There were four creatures in the game – three dragons and a bat – and I wanted to make them act autonomously. So I came up with a data structure to represent a creature's behaviours. Each had a different priority list of objects and whether to go towards or away from that object, which I called 'desires' and 'fears', and it meant they did things independently of the player. The simulation routines for the creatures ran continuously, so the creatures existed and did things offscreen. They had motivations which could be inferred from their actions, like when the bat steals your sword and leaves behind one of the dragons. That always got a laugh."

Robinett created a network of 30 screens containing intricate mazes – some of which must be navigated by flashlight – a moveable bridge to reach inaccessible areas and, though the dragons might have resembled giant ducks, they could still consume your character in two gulps.



Robinett saw none of Adventure's vast profits. "No congratulations, no pat on the pat, not even a pizza. Royalties? Hell, no!"

So for this epic quest to retrieve the Holy Grail (later changed to the 'Enchanted Chalice' by marketing, who feared the religious imagery might offend middle America), what does Robinett choose as the first avatar in an action adventure game? A small, plain square. Was choosing such a non-specific character icon a conscious decision, encouraging a greater degree of player projection?

"Yeah," muses Robinett. "I did read this book called Understanding Comics by Scott McCloud which gave me an intellectual rationalisation. It explained the different psychological impacts of a very detailed character representation versus a cruder, sketchier avatar. If you make it too specific, it rules out a lot of possibilities of what the player might project on to it…"

He laughs, and then comes clean: "But that was 20 years later! At the time, it was a practical necessity. The 2600 only had five sprites, two high-res and three low-res, and I wanted to save the two decent sprites for the objects and creatures."



After a month of 15-hour days, Robinett had a working prototype, which allowed the player to move from screen to screen pursued by a dragon. His boss, George Simcock, who'd been brought in from aeroplane manufacturer Lockheed to bring some discipline to the creative but chaotic bunch of young game developers at Atari, was livid.

"George had told me it was impossible, but I was headstrong and felt inspired. Games were labours of love for the designers back then and he just didn't get it. He thought engineers should do what they were told, like show up in the morning and other similarly conservative ideas. Marketing really liked it, though. And then told me I should turn it into a Superman game."

Fortunately, fellow programmer John Dunn took on the Superman

project and Robinett could continue work on his Dungeons & Dragons opus. Cramming all his ideas into a meagre 4K of ROM required some ruthlessly efficient coding. Having taken a class by Ken Thompson at Berkley, who introduced Unix and C to the world, Robinett brought what he terms a unique 'C-style coding mindset' to the assembly language of the 6502 processor.

"I learned how to be efficient. What most Atari programmers did back then were things like replacing a three-byte 'jump' instruction with a two-byte 'branch' instruction. Squeezing it down one byte at a time, hunting around to get it under 4,096 bytes. I had the training to know that the biggest gains came from good algorithms and good pointer-based data structures and look-up tables. It allowed me to do something pretty sophisticated in a small space."

Robinett crunched down the code and even had a whopping 17 bytes of unused memory. Wasn't there a temptation to cram some sort of RPG attribute system into the spare space?

"Actually, I did try to create a multiplayer link-up system, so two players could be playing *Adventure* in the same world and could see each other if they entered the same room. I cut off the ends of two Atari joysticks, wired them to a ribbon cable and connected two development systems. I proved you could send bits from one to the other. You'd think my boss might have been pleased I was coming up with interesting stuff, but he was just pissed that I'd defied him, plus I was demoralised and running short of memory, so it never went any further. Twenty-five years later and you can see it was an idea with legs..."

Adventure was released in time for Christmas 1979 and went on to sell a million units at $25 each. Robinett, on a salary of $22,000, saw none of the vast profits it generated and left Atari.

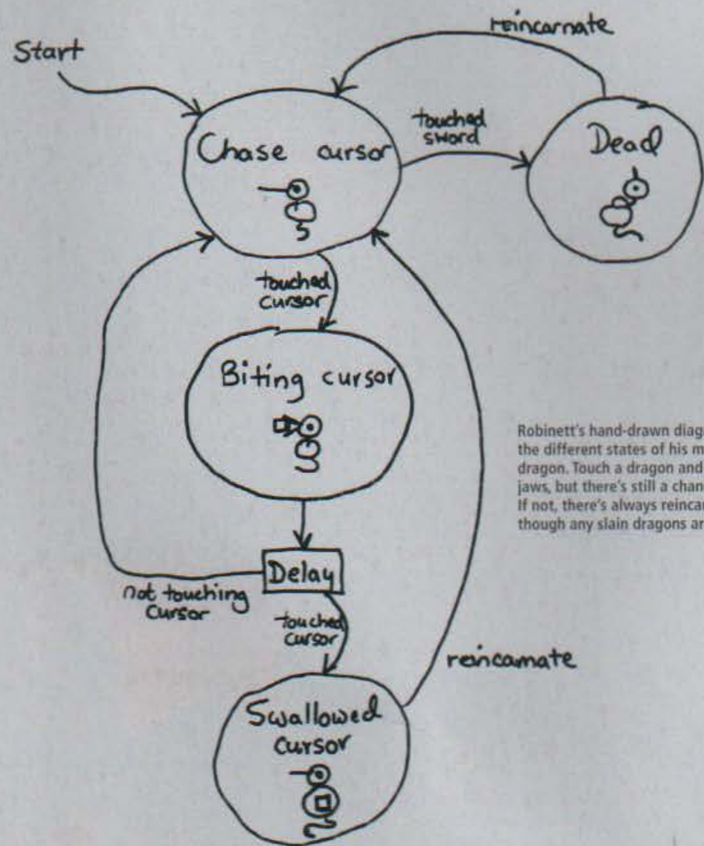
"No congratulations, no pat on the back, not even a pizza. Royalties? Hell, no! I was disgusted and kind of burned out, so it felt like the right time to quit. And I'd left my little 'Fuck You' secret in there."

He's referring to *Adventure*'s infamous hidden room, which contained his name in flashing lights, defying Atari's policy of keeping its programmers strictly anonymous. Inspired by the reputed hidden messages in Beatles' records, this first ever computer Easter egg required locating a barely visible, apparently insignificant single pixel in an isolated room, but without it the game could not be truly completed – another reference to the condition of the Atari programmer, perhaps.

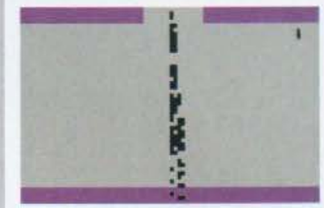
With Robinett gone, a sequel to *Adventure* was never produced.

Yet the groundbreaking steps it took in establishing so much of what we take for granted in videogames – autonomous enemy behaviour, the importance of offscreen events, the permanence of objects in the gameworld, the concept of secret areas – means its legacy is assured. Does he ever look at modern games and think: 'I started that?'

There's an embarrassed pause, then: "Look, I hope I'm somewhere between arrogance and false modesty. I knew I'd created something significant but I want to acknowledge my debt to Willie Crowther and Don Woods and what they achieved with *Adventure* the text game. I think I took it some steps forward and I'm proud of that. It was germinal. Or seminal, maybe you'd say. I don't know – I just hit a sweet spot."



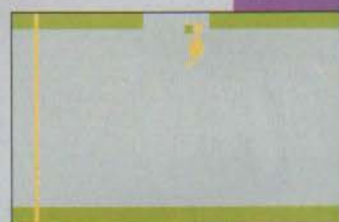
Robinett's hand-drawn diagram shows the different states of his man-eating dragon. Touch a dragon and it opens its jaws, but there's still a chance to escape. If not, there's always reincarnation, though any slain dragons are also revived

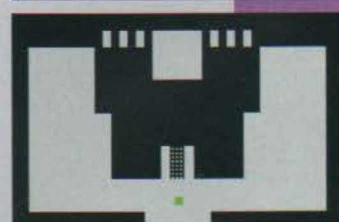


EGG HUNT

The secret room containing Robinett's signature was eventually discovered in 1980 by a 12-year-old boy from Salt Lake City, and was reported excitedly in Electronic Games magazine.

"I thought I'd hidden it pretty well, but there were some clues to the location of the 'Gray Dot' I hadn't realised existed," explains Robinett. "The way the display routine worked, if more than two objects were in the same room, they would flash. So if you could only see two objects but they were still blinking, you kind of wondered what else was there. Also, I didn't count on kids making such detailed maps and noticing there was this one isolated room you needed the bridge to get to... I suppose it was my attempt at irony – something small and insignificant-looking, yet important. Like in the Wizard of Oz: 'Pay no attention to that little man behind the curtain'."





With the complex sprites reserved for enemies and objects, your brave adventurer was represented by the most heroic green square of all time

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Volatile Games

DATE FOUNDED: 2005

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 45

HEADS OF STUDIO: (Below, from left) Chris Swan and Dave Manuel





URL: www.volatilegames.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
Not applicable

KEY STAFF:
Ian Pestridge (creative manager), Nick Adams (design manager), Tony Povey (technical manager), Nick Dixon (design manager), Richard Jones (creative manager), Steve Bruce (external projects manager), Simon Smith (business development associate)





The innovatively engineered zombie actioner *Possession* will be Volatile's debut project



LOCATION:
Leamington Spa

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Possession (next-gen), major movie project (current-gen), plus other high-profile games in the pipeline for next-gen

PHILOSOPHY AND TECHNOLOGY

"Volatile Games is the new mature content division of Blitz Games. Volatile was established to release games with radically different subject matter using the superb technology, expertise, and stability of Blitz. The Volatile division is committed to the highest quality and leading the development of next-generation technology throughout the company.

"Volatile's remit is simple – games made by adults for adults, with all the sophisticated gameplay, artwork and themes this suggests.

"*Possession*, our zombie action game, is widely recognised as one of the most innovative and original projects in development for next-gen machines, pushing the boundaries of both technology and gameplay. Our suite of cross-platform development tools, BlitzWare, is one of the best-featured development environments in the world and already supports next-generation hardware and its associated high-end development requirements.

"We pride ourselves in maintaining a very stable company with extensive employee benefits and a philosophy of 'careers rather than jobs'. Now actively recruiting talented individuals from all media industries, Volatile Games will more than double in size over the next year."



Codeshop
Tracking developments in development

Make your own

FPS Creator, the latest release from DIY tools company The Game Creators, combines ease of use with plenty of technical grunt



Lee Bamber, lead programmer and MD of The Game Creators

www.thegamecreators.com

The PC firstperson shooter is that most contrary of genres. Depending on your point of view, it's either completely moribund or completely electrifying. Fundamentally for many gamers, it's just too heavy in its demands. Even with the latest graphics, audio and soon-to-be-released physics cards plus water-cooled CPUs, high-precision mouse and 7.1 surround sound system, you'll still end up playing pretty much the same game as *Wolfenstein 3D* offered back in 1992. For aficionados though, it's the subtle variation of form which provides the excitement. The spectrum between *Quake 4*, *Serious Sam II*, *FEAR* and *Starship Troopers* is comparable to the variation of Charles Darwin's Galapagos Island finches; each has its own distinct slot in the universe.

For **Lee Bamber**, chief programmer of The Game Creators, this passion mixed with the desire to see something different is what's behind FPS Creator.

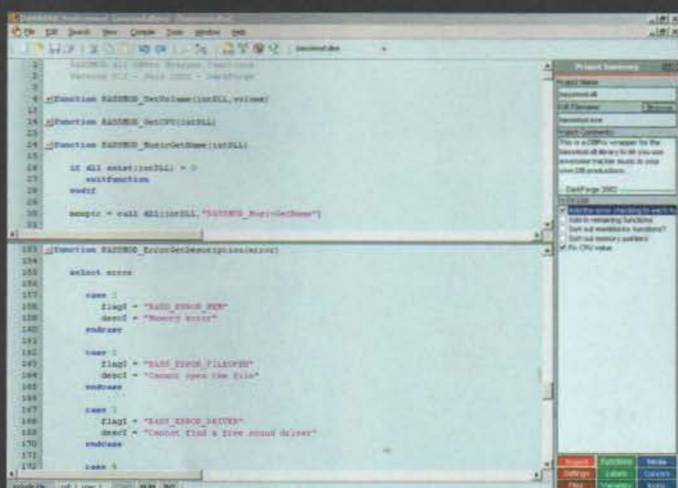
"It was precisely because the FPS is one of the hardest genres to write for that we chose it," he explains. "Our experience tells us many of our customers will want to write an FPS at some point, and the advantage of the FPS style of engine is that you can create other genres such as roleplaying games with it. Of course, the results won't compare to triple-A titles in terms of content, so we show our users the fun of the creative process rather than focusing on the end result."

The latest product from the company which boasts a range of DIY game creation tools such as DarkBASIC and the 2D-oriented Play Basic, FPS Creator been released to allow people to make their own action-packed games without any required programming or modelling knowledge. Instead, using a visual interface and assets from two bundled art packs, you craft game environments selecting some of the 300 objects such as corridors, walls, doors and stairs and simply paint them into place. These sections will intelligently work out how they should be aligned, so wall segments join up and placing a lightswitch in a room automatically connects it to the lighting within.

If desired, external textures and models can be imported using the standard X file format. Alternatively, FPS Creator comes with a segment editor that allows you to create scene geometry objects and an entity editor for items and characters. Assets can then be dropped into the folder structure and selected from within the package.

Creating the actions that turn an environment into a game come via an internal scripting language. "It's a simple lexicon comprising of action words,

The physics and multiplayer components create a level playing field for novice and expert alike



DarkBASIC Pro isn't a pretty package but the integrated development environment includes a debugger with breakpoints and a stepthrough mode, as well as formatting, help and samples





One example of a DarkBASIC Pro-generated utility is this 3D benchmark to test the performance of DarkBASIC on your PC

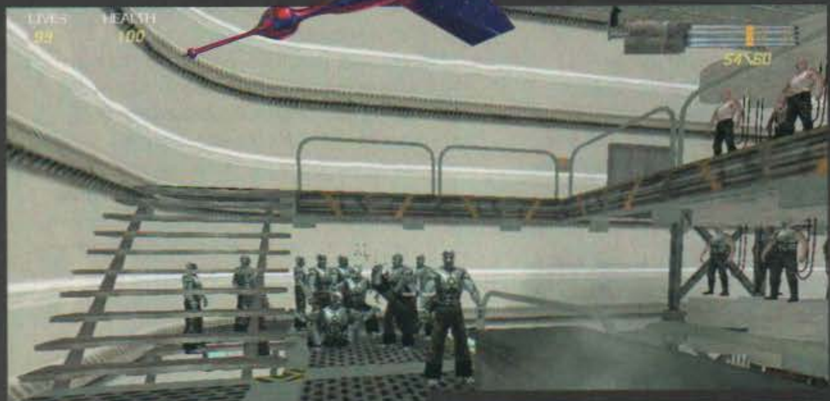
condition words and setting values," says Bamber. This is used to control actions such as triggering sound effects through to experimenting with artificial intelligence. Other options within the package include support for making internet and LAN-based multiplayer games, a built-in profiler that analyses and optimises your game's framerate, and a complete physics engine.

"It took six attempts to get the collisions right, but it was my best moment in the project," Bamber grins. "You make a structure of boxes, exploding barrels and furniture and throw grenades at it, then wait to see what happens. It transformed my test games from a predictable A-to-B design into a magical universe where anything could happen."

Developed over three years, FPS Creator itself is a great example of the potential of the company's DarkBASIC Pro software, as it was almost completely written using this easy-to-understand BASIC programming language. "Yes, most of the clever stuff was written in plain old BASIC," says Bamber, underlining his philosophy of providing powerful functionality wrapped within a simple-to-use package. The physics and multiplayer components required specifically written dynamic linked libraries but these, in turn, have been released in the latest version of DarkBASIC Pro, creating a level playing field for novice and expert alike.



DarkBASIC Pro is a technology that supports high-end graphics features such as DirectX 9's realtime shadows and sphere mapping while only requiring users to code using the easy-to-understand language BASIC





All created by members of the FPS Creator early adopter programme, these screens demonstrate the look and feel of games that can be created with the package. You'll also be able to import your own art assets to further vary the style

FPS Creator's performance optimisation also required some specific attention. "It was especially the case because this is a generic FPS engine, so we have very little control about what users will place in their game levels," muses Bamber.

But ultimately it's this freedom to do whatever you want that seems likely to offer users the most enjoyment. From those happy to play around, seldom completing their projects, to the hardcore who spend hundreds of hours on their creations and then make their games available commercially or as freeware, the product range from The Game Creators caters to all tastes.

It's something that's true even in the case of a relatively simple package such as FPS Creator, as the game engine source code will be released so expert users can get to grips with how it really works. "We anticipate some users will want to break open the engine immediately to add their own code," says Bamber. "And because we've used DarkBASIC Pro, it makes this considerably more accessible than giving them a thousand of lines of C++. It provides the opportunity to customise and add to the engine, which in turn will ultimately benefit the community as a whole."



Pushing boundaries

More than just a software development company, The Game Creators also nurtures a growing community of would-be developers, ranging from students learning how to program to those reliving their days getting a Spectrum to fill a screen with 'Hello World'.

"It is quite diverse," says Bamber, who started his own coding work back in the days of the AMOS language for the Amiga. "Some users are just starting out and use the community to find out what they need to begin, while others are seasoned professionals who use DarkBASIC Pro for prototyping and working through ideas. We also have a number who regularly finish games, and our competitions prove a hundred games can be whipped up on demand."

Part of this variety is due to the range of software the company offers, from the drag-and-drop simplicity of 3D Game Creator and FPS Creator to the various flavours of DarkBASIC. The most high powered is the DarkBASIC Pro SDK, something which breaks out of the BASIC-style language into a C++ environment with all the performance advantages this bring.

"It's designed so C++ programmers can skip the headache of learning 3D APIs such as DirectX or OpenGL and jump straight in to games creation," Bamber enthuses.



BY GARY PENN

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Under control

Fahrenheit? Bagoshite more like. It's a twat magnet. Now the Nintendo Revolution... that's real genius. While Sony and Microsoft are caught up in a cock comparison competition, Nintendo comes in with modest, incomparable oddity. Once again the Big N 'eschews the zeitgeist' and I'm moist with anticipation.

While Sony and Microsoft show finely lubricated muscle at work – predictable, vulgar displays of potency – Nintendo chooses to show reaction shots of 'real' people at play, a suggested cross-section of society showing 'real' emotions. It's easy to connect with them – to share their unbridled joy with only a suggestion of what they might be doing. Watching, say, footage of *MGS4* or *PGR3* it's easy to be impressed by more of the same only more so – more realistic-looking. But it's like pornography: shallow wank-fodder.

> Come next year the familiar 'boomerang' controller will seem so last millennium as we are enamoured by the use of a remote control

There have been times over the past five years or so that I thought Nintendo was losing it, running around in ever-decreasing anachronistic circles, leaving Sony and Microsoft to hog the limelight. Nintendo is clearly the (very) odd one out, the family freak with corks on its forks, but ultimately all the more endearing to me because of it. The most impressive aspect of the Revolution is clearly the controller. On the face of it it's no more than a television remote control, a device more familiar to more people, more comfortable to use than joysticks or 'joypads'.

As much as I manage with pads and analogue sticks they never feel as tangible as a decent-sized digital joystick, typically with a bulbous end. It's clearly a penis thing. Playing with an analogue joystick is like playing with a broken, flaccid cock. It isn't connected enough, there's no real sense of influence through the stick – the results are more like coincidence. It's not as if the analogue aspect is genuinely sensitive (or that players are either). There's not enough tactile resistance, no genuine feeling of moving the protrusion small or large distances, quickly or slowly, hard or soft.

For years we have been controlling toys in a way comparable to radio controlled cars, aircraft, et al. There's always been an obvious physical impedance and it's become increasingly convoluted over the years. But come next year the familiar 'boomerang' controller will seem so last millennium as we are enamoured by the use of a remote control as a prop – as a physical toy to control virtual toys, using it to pretend in actual and virtual space simultaneously, to bridge the two spaces, to bring the physical controller and virtual control closer together.

Who can be bothered to take time out to think about exactly what they are playing with? Or rather, what exactly they are controlling? That action figure armed with accessories... are you controlling the action figure's legs, head, torso, brain? Turning the head so the body follows and the legs are activated in order to stop the action figure from toppling? Are you issuing orders? Are you controlling the vehicle, the action figure controlling the vehicle or something else? Are you tilting the playscape to influence your vehicle or controlling external forces such as the air around the vehicle – or even the camera, which acts as a lure? There are unlimited ways to skin the control cat – some more obvious than others, most not immediate or satisfying enough.

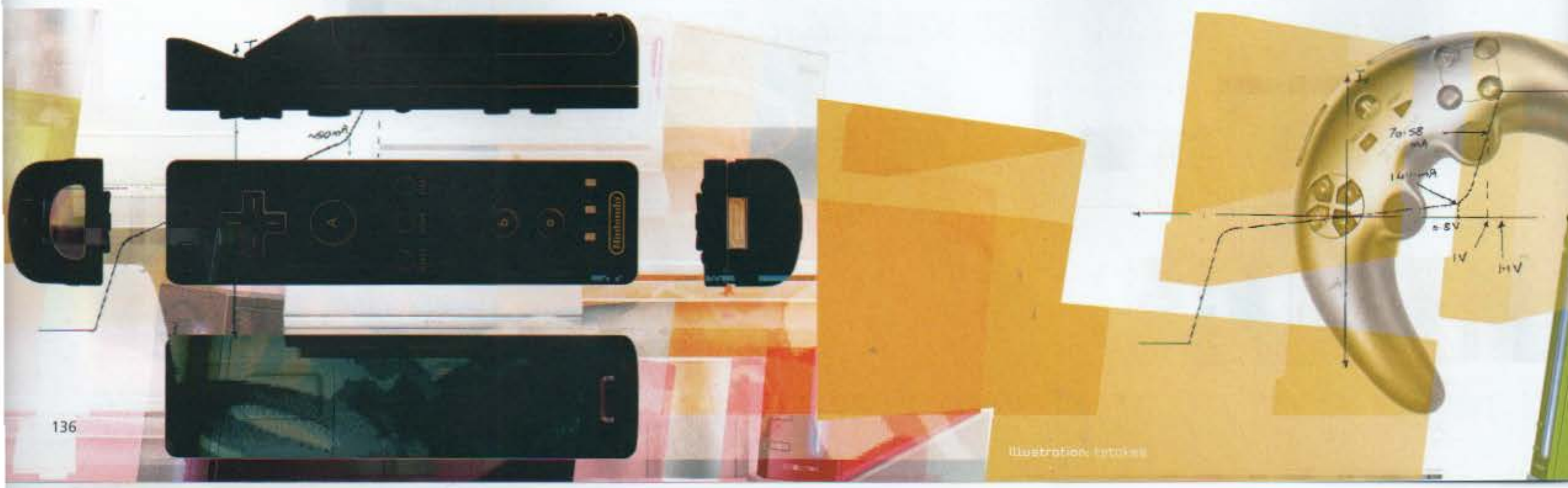
So much goes on behind the scenes – nothing is as straightforward as it looks (it is an illusion, after all). Of course, it doesn't matter what exactly it is you control so long as the end result is the same, just so long as the toy does what you want when you want. With the Revolution controller the control is likely to be more direct – and, I hope, more often more unusual. This natural, gestural stick – a stick that can become anything in the right hands, like a stick in the hands of a child. It suggests nothing but a whole new way to play and new ways to play. (The controller attachments feel like an oversight addressed, but appear to be invaluable for more established play.)

The desire to use gestures to play is nothing new and it's all very well (take EyeToy) but I prefer a prop, a degree of tactile connection. Many EyeToy games are more satisfying when props are used (sponges to clean windows spring to mind). Even so, EyeToy certainly hit the nail on the head most prominently – although most of the games quickly wear thin without any form of social lubrication. EyeToy and its ilk are commendable, especially for attracting and capturing less 'traditional' players, which is essential if play is ever to become the entertainment ethos of the 21st century.

The Revolution also appears to herald a return to the development and use of smaller, tighter, simpler snack play: games more like music – 'singles' with simple repeated themes – and less like blockbuster movies (well, certainly in terms of scale, production values, teams, budgets and structure).

I'm not the first and I won't be the last to say: "Vive la Revolution".

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki





BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN

Virtual law

Where there's no law, there's no bread', Benjamin Franklin wrote. The converse is also true: where there's bread, there's law, and where there's law, there's disagreement. Now that people make real dough in virtual worlds, the ways those worlds are policed has become increasingly important. Virtual residents know, though, that real-world courts rarely offer recourse for virtual damages. Even in Korea, where the phenomenon of mass population of virtual worlds has reached its peak, real-world cases rarely extend beyond violence caused by games. There, the Seoul Police Cyber-Terror Unit told me virtual objects have no legal value. If you pay for a virtual sword and it isn't delivered, it's fraud – you've lost money – but if you deliver a virtual sword and they don't pay, well, that's just an argument.

The paradox of virtual worlds is that, once we've been liberated from our physical selves, it's only the social trespasses that offend. I headed back to *Second Life* this month, to the world where people seem to both care and disagree the most about how their virtual world should be. There, to take two actual examples, a sniper who took pot-shots through a school window was a nuisance; someone who skinny-dipped in a PG area was far more frowned upon. The usual path of action for disagreement in virtual worlds is to plead with the developers, usually via a GM, to intervene. In *Second Life*, they have a points system; someone throwing a firebomb at a wedding might get a few points, whereas someone writing a self-replicating, heavily scripted object that causes a whole section of *Second Life* to crash – a kind of terrorist attack against the infrastructure – would be suspended. Last month, I wrote about Methical, the *EverQuest 2* duper who saw himself as a kind of new-world Billy the Kid. Once Methical's dupe was discovered, though, Sony shut him down. But what about more subtle forms of disagreement? What if your neighbour builds a tower block and puts your garden in the shade? Who can you turn to?

Two law school students, Judge Mason and Judge Churchill, have taken it upon themselves to solve this problem: they've opened the Second Life Superior Court. Residents can take their arguments, large or small, to the in-world courtroom. The judges will, with reference to the Community Standards and their own knowledge of real-world law, resolve the disputes. The court follows basic legal procedure, including brief and counter-brief, and any decision by the court is final.

> "A sniper who took pot-shots through a school window was a nuisance; someone who skinny-dipped was far more frowned upon"

However: 'What a mind-numbingly futile exercise', Tony Walsh wrote on an *SL* bulletin board. ,So now we have yet another level of tedious bureaucracy to *Second Life*, one administered by self-appointed 'officials' with no recognised real-world powers let alone make-believe ones. I'm in contempt of this kangaroo court'. Others wondered whether the court would have any teeth to back up its judgements, or even what would happen if a Linden (an employee of developer Linden Lab) was the target of a case. 'Perhaps even the Lindens themselves will take action to stop this', wrote another resident, Dygash Talamasca.

When I visited the Linden Lab San Francisco offices, I broached this subject. Rather than expressing concern about emergent resident-le[d] government and legal systems, every Linden I spoke to was excited about it: "There is one small community," **Robin Linden** told me, "called New Altonburg, that does have a system of self-governing." The Lindens see their Terms of Service and Community Standards as a kind of basic constitution (virtual tablets handed down from the mountain), designed to foster a cooperative culture based on mediation rather than arbitration. But the idea of emergent arbitration – like the court – seemed to excite them. They hoped that systems of self-policing communities would emerge to handle disputes.

One of the remarkable aspects of virtual worlds is it gives us an opportunity to observe the development of society again, from basic tenets. The law was once based on excommunication as the ultimate punishment; the same is still true of virtual worlds. And one *Second Life* resident, **Zarf Vantongerloo**, has discovered that most of the agreements that make up the law depend ultimately on one thing: signed documents. Using cryptographic keys and secure communication with a server outside of *Second Life*, he has come up with a notary service, providing signed documents tha[t] can tell if they have been tampered with, for virtual agreements and business deals. The only possible flaw in his process, he told the *Second Life* embedded journalist Hamlet Linden, was in trusting him: "In real life... you have to trust that the notary down the street isn't faking your signatures on things. So yes, you have to trust me." Once again, it seems, the liberation afforded by virtual worlds lands us right back into the basic human dilemma of trust and distrust, power and vulnerability. But at least we're trying. As the poet Eliza Cook wrote: "Who would not rather trust and be deceived?"

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Grant





BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION

Listing badly

In the wacky world of journalism, lists are useful things. As I write this, the media is reporting the awfully important news that an important music magazine has published one of those lists of the most important British songs of all time. This time, A Day In The Life is at number one, with Robbie Williams' Angels, Bowie's Life On Mars and Oasis' Wonderwall also spreadeagled lewdly in the top ten. Such lists are, of course, pointless. Music is like cakes: how can you truly argue that the humble Pontefract is the best type of cake when someone else might prefer a cream horn? Titter!

You could punt that accusation between the buttocks of the gaming media, which is equally obsessed with best-of lists. The difference with games is that you can make a definitive statement about The Best Game Ever: it's *Tetris*.

With *Tetris*, there can be no such difference of opinion, or viewpoint tainted by so-called 'ponce-baggage'. Whomever you are, whatever your background – young, old, rich, poor, stupid, smart, tramp, tart, handsome amputee, or hideous octopus-man – it's not whether or not you like *Tetris*, it's a question of whether or not you've played it. *Tetris* crosses boundaries, and unites us all in a way that *Half-Life 2* and little Bono could never do. It doesn't discriminate between its players, and consequently nothing can touch it for sheer universal appeal. It simply is the greatest game ever made, no argument. And yet, every attempt to separate it from the Game Boy has failed.

> Tetris doesn't discriminate between its players, and consequently nothing can touch it for sheer universal appeal

Attempts to make *Tetris* 'fit' on other consoles have been like using a bread knife to cut gills in a horse's throat so that it'd be at home in your garden pond. Though it existed before the handheld market spurted forth from Nintendo's eerily depilated loins, Game Boy and *Tetris* – whether by design or accident – were the perfect symbiosis of software and hardware.

What's so depressing about the current generation of handhelds is that games are being ported over from consoles without a great deal of thought as to where they're ending up.

The PSP is lumbered with *GTA: Liberty City Stories*, *Medievil Resurrection* and all those ruddy racing games that at best smack of blinkered mentalism, and, at worst, flaccid cynicism. Yes, they play OK – but they're not really handheld games. They lack that quick-burst immediacy you want from the best handheld titles. You look at the forthcoming PSP releases, and it's a surfeit of 3D nonsense. Firstperson shooters, racing games, sports sims, beat 'em ups, RPGs with 'epic, 3D visuals'. All well and good, but I can get all that on the PS2 or Xbox or GC. If I want to play a futuristic hovercraft racing game I don't want to do it on the bus. Developers are taking the easy route, when Sony should be forcing them to make more leaps of faith. The PSP may be a 3D powerhouse, but just because you can do something doesn't mean you should.

The DS fares better – primarily because the touchpad is encouraging developers to utilise it – witness the likes of *Nintendogs*, *Meteos*, *Wario Ware: Touched!*, and the stupidly lovely *Zoo Keeper*. Even then there are missteps, like *Mario 64 DS* – a prime example of a handheld game that doesn't sit comfortably because it was never meant to be a handheld game. Though just about redeemed by some excellent minigames, it's nowhere near as satisfying as its original iteration, even if I'm too stupid or drunk to be able to explain exactly why.

A couple of years back I was approached about adapting a little-known novel into a screenplay. I knew from the start that it was going to be a difficult gig when the producer told me: "We like where it's set, and the first chapter, but we don't particularly like the characters, the tone, or the story." Ignoring his chronic ignorance, over the course of several months I struggled to remain true to the author's work, while simultaneously trying to make the story function within a 90-minute, three-act structure. My efforts continually baffled the producer, who couldn't understand why I kept the story true to its violent thriller origins (if not its stream-of-consciousness structure), rather than transform it into the knockabout, sub-Carry On farce he desired.

I learned that adapting a work from one medium to another requires a different approach with each new medium. It's why an affair subplot was missing from the movie version of Peter Benchley's Jaws, why they moved Shelob from The Two Towers to Return Of The King, and why Planet of the Apes – based upon Pierre Boulle's Monkey Planet – features a more budget-friendly, apocalyptic depiction of an ape-ruled future than the book's simian metropolis. It applies as much to translating book to screen as it does to sliding game franchises from console to handheld.

I may have limited firsthand experience of adapting console brands to handheld formats, but I know a drowning horse when I see one, and as it currently stands there are slightly too many horses drowning in Sony and Nintendo's shallow pools. (Note: this is a metaphor. I am not accusing anyone of being horse killers...)

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television

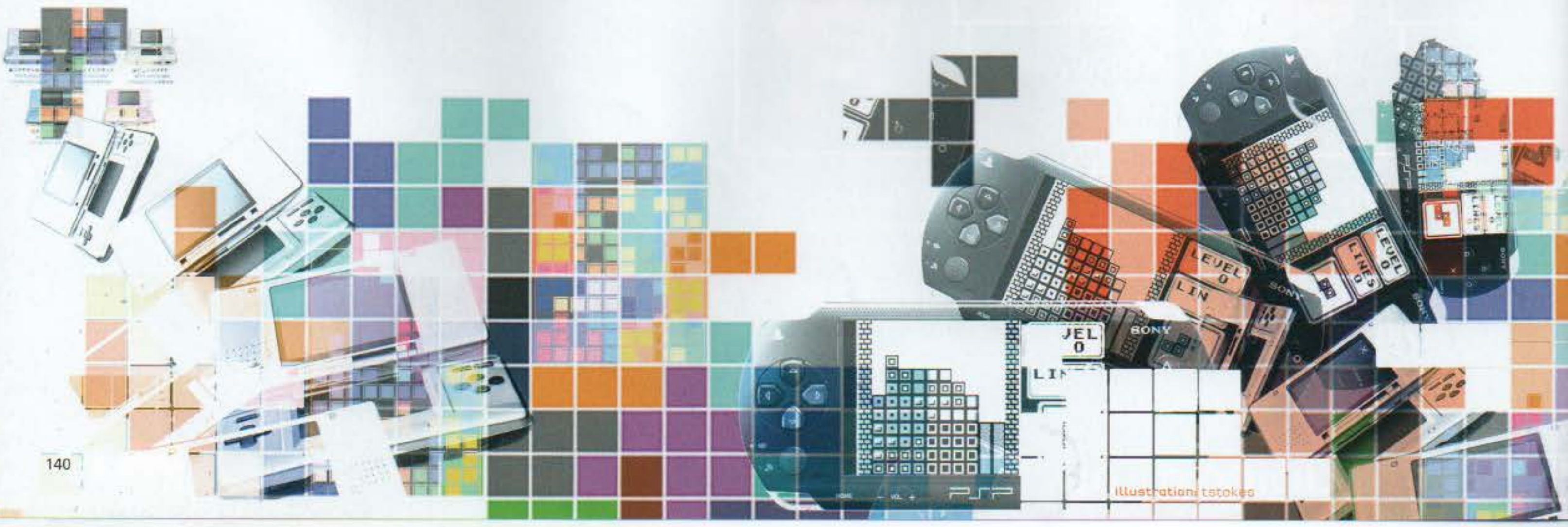


illustration: tstokes

inbox



Issue 155

ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: The Earliest Point You Abandoned a Game

When I had my Spectrum I got the text adventure *Rebel Planet*. I literally got stuck on the first screen because I could not find the right command to get off the spaceship your character starts on. There being no internet I could use in 1989 I had to abandon the game unfinished. On the first screen.
ppparkinson9

Full Spectrum Warrior – couldn't handle the stress of crossing the road in training, never mind full combat. Gave up after the training mission.
suhawk

Amped, about ten minutes after sliding down the hill a couple of times without being able to do a trick and getting annoyed at the abuse I was receiving from the photographers. "You're shit!" they were yelling.
Post Mortem

I've been a reader since issue one but this is my first time writing in. What moved me to write was the reported accusation of piracy attributed to secondhand game sales and rentals by Epic's Mark Rein in **E**154.

It is true that your old operating system software shouldn't be sold on even after you've up graded to a new version – Microsoft XP effectively demonstrates the point – and that games are copywritten software, so it's presumed that the same rules would apply. Thinking along those lines I can see why Mark would take that position. But from a consumer's vantage point, secondhand game sales and rentals are a godsend. With the number of desirable games that are released each year, to purchase even half of them would cost a small fortune, and then there is finding the time to play them all. You would end up with a vast stockpile of games yet to be played or completed, and you still have an eye on the new console awaiting a release date.

Secondhand games allow some breathing room so you don't have to rush out to buy every game you desire before its shelflife runs out and it's never seen again. As for rentals, well, why not try before you buy? We all know how disappointing it is playing a game you quickly realise you could have done without. And what about collectors of 'retro' games?

When *OutRun 2* and *Prince of Persia: The Sands Of Time* were released, who, of those familiar with the first versions, wouldn't have liked the game disc to have included the original game as an added bonus? It would have reminded us of how fun those games were to play as well as showing the uninitiated what the fuss is about. Now you try finding an original copy of *Prince Of Persia* ("Good luck, Mr Jones")!

The music and film industries consider the copying and/or distribution of non-original IP as piracy; with secondhand games nothing is being copied and then sold – they're all original. If Mark moves the industry to crack down on secondhand sales then mods and emulation are next (you'd think they would be first!), the moment serious financial figures start emerging from both of those communities.

Right now I can go to a store and buy music and films made before I was even born. It's difficult to do the same thing with games – at the moment publishers only release copies of old games that were popular in their day, but what if I want a game that wasn't commercially popular but still a great game? Where would they have me go for that?

In any other part of the software industry Mark's concerns would make sense, but videogames are a cultural end product, like high art, music and film, not software development tools to make such products. A witchhunt of secondhand games and rentals affects the soul of the industry, the very culture the industry nurtures and depends on.

Do you see my point?
David Matthews

You make several good points, yes. Although we have to point out, of course, that the original *Prince Of Persia* game was an unlockable extra within *The Sands Of Time*.

With a few notable exceptions it seems that game developers find it as difficult to interpret film as film directors find it to interpret games

I really enjoyed your 'Screen Play' article (**E**155), which reminded me of the great games that have been made into horrible films. Some of these I had chosen to forget (Street Fighter) and others my brain chose for me (Double Dragon). However, I noted that you didn't mention Street Fighter II: The Animated Movie, which I urge anyone who may have been left disappointed by the live-action version to watch.

One thing I noticed as I read your article was the way the film industry bastardises games to fit them into their existing template for an action film, resulting in unimaginative movies. Game developers, on the other hand, seem to try and recreate the film, resulting in nothing but an interactive retelling of it, which also results in unimaginative solutions. It seems ironic that games are restricted by the fact that their movie inspiration hampers their creativity while movies take nothing more than character names or game titles and could be well advised to borrow more content. With few notable exceptions it seems that game developers find it as difficult to interpret film as film directors find it to interpret games. *SW: KOTOR* and *The Chronicles Of Riddick* are great examples of why developers should be a little more creative with licences.
James Glisson

For the record, we didn't cover Street Fighter II: The Animated Movie because the article was focused strictly on live-action flicks. Perhaps in the future we'll take a look at the animated scene, which certainly contains some interesting examples.

After reading René Kneyber's letter in **E**154, I couldn't help myself replying. As he correctly states, Microsoft has been described as having the better online experience in the next-gen war. He then goes on to disagree with this and promote the virtues of online gaming on the PC.

The next-gen war is between Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo, and not the mysterious PC Corporation. Microsoft has been touted as having a better online experience due to promises it has made for the Xbox 360 combined with its track record on the Xbox. If you look at the current generation of consoles, the GameCube has no online functions and the PS2's online capabilities are a farce. With the PS2 you only need a dial-up modem to play, making for horrendous lag. With the Xbox, the menus are set out simply, and the whole Friends concept is genius. Broadband connection is a prerequisite, making for only occasional lag if playing against people in distant countries. René mentions *Halo 2* and *Moto GP* as the only highlights, but there are countless others. It would be a blessing, of course, if all games had the same intuitive menus as *Project Gotham Racing 2*, on which I've had countless hours of fun, but there are too many good online games to mention, and whatever floats your boat you'll find it. So in terms of online experience on next-gen consoles, my money would be behind Xbox 360.

If, however, you want to compare online gaming on the Xbox to online gaming on the PC, the Xbox certainly has a lot going for it. Ninety-nine per cent of people have a communicator headset, so there's no need to type your insults or praises. The Friends list allows you to see who's playing and join them or send them an invite if you wish. If you want to talk about costs, then yes, the Xbox subscription does amount to about 15p a day, but for £200 or so and a broadband connection you get your Xbox, your subscription and



James Glisson cites *The Chronicles Of Riddick* as an example of how developers can make imaginative use of movie source material

two or three games. £200 probably won't even cover the cost of replacing your PC's graphics card so you have a chance of playing *Half-Life 2* properly. I don't bother buying PCs for gaming any more, but I would have thought that a decent gaming PC would cost £1,500+, easily enough to buy yourself an Xbox 360, loads of games and a Live subscription that'll last to the end of the 360's life, by which time your PC will have long been obsolete.

At the end of the day, René, Xbox Live can't have been that bad. After all, you subscribed to it for two years!
Malcolm Rollo

The simple fact is that, if Microsoft falls down in other areas with its Xbox 360 launch, it will at least, as you suggest, have the most robust and comprehensively featured online console service imaginable. Moving on from there, all it needs to do is convince the whole gaming world, not just a small proportion of it, that superior online activity adds enough value to its package. It looks certain to be a slow process, but it's something to which Microsoft is fully committed.

After all the fuss and legal expense on Sony's part battling against imported PSPs, it was generous of them to send me a free UMD for my import anyway

After all the fuss and legal expense on Sony's part battling against imported PSPs, it was very generous of them to send me a free copy of the Spider-Man UMD for my import anyway. Once the PSP was officially launched, I successfully registered my Japanese import PSP on www.yourpsp.com with no problems and am now in possession of the free film. The icing on the cake is that the film was accompanied by a letter whose first sentence reads: 'You waited patiently for PSP to launch...'

Several friends of mine have also done this. Hmmm. I feel there may be some crossed wires at Sony. Either that or it's a carefully laid trap and I'll be getting a knock at the door from the suits sometime soon.
Anonymous

Well, you were in the clear before you sent this letter boasting about it.

Whilst I've always found your magazine to be needlessly verbose and extremely pretentious, you really surpassed yourselves with the article 'Squad Damage' in issue 154. I quote: 'As much as it may have over-exploited its resources, id retains the spiritual trademark on gaming's treatment of American sci-fi horror; if its craft is the skeleton of every FPS that gaming's ever seen, its art is the logical yet twisted fusion of Cronenberg's New Flesh and Reznor's Downward Spiral, disarmingly adolescent in its rage but savage in its disregard for the sanctity of the human body."

That really must be one of the longest, pointless and needlessly obtuse sentences ever committed to print. Whilst I'm no professional writer, please allow me to attempt to communicate the same point: 'Id are using the *Doom 3* engine again, except this time it's cyborgs'.

Whilst I admit that I'm unlikely to win the Booker prize for my effort, at least it doesn't sound like a sixth-form English student trying to fuck his teacher.
Matt Masterson

In this instance it seems only pertinent, Matt, to extend our contrafibularities.

I was surprised to read Mr Biffo's column in issue 155. I agree that creativity has been sacrificed in the industry as part of the pursuit of profit, and I agree that it's a terrible shame, and that something needs to be done about it. But how a column raising this

Continued

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Topic: The greatest story ever told

Last Christmas I got two games, *Halo 2* and *Pro Evo 4*. One of them has turned out to have one of the best stories in videogames – and it's not *Halo 2*.

The story of a small second division football club gradually rising through the ranks to become the best in Europe, with all the drama of extra-time cup final wins, three-goal comebacks in the second legs of champions league semi-finals and so on, managed to capture my imagination more than pretty much any game plot that anyone has ever written for me. I wouldn't want to single out *Halo 2* particularly, but I can't even remember what the story was all about. It might as well have said 'Strike out against the evil Bydo empire' on the title screen and left me to get on with it. That used to be enough and frankly, with the low quality of most modern scenarios/characters/scripts, I sometimes wish developers would stop trying to be film makers and return to the simplicity of previous days.

The point is, in most genres we don't need a tediously told story to frame the action. The action itself is the story, the one that we tell ourselves – and that's one of the things that makes games such a unique entertainment media. Would *PES* be better with dramatic cutscenes showing the dialogue between the manager and the chairman? No, it would just get in the way of the real story.
JB

I don't think games need stories, I think they need incentives. All I want to know is what I'm supposed to be doing and a vague idea of why I'm supposed to be doing it. I'm shooting invaders, possibly from Space, because they're going to destroy the world. Fantastic, off I go.

Games like *Eternal Darkness* have proved that a story can be told through the game, without overlong cutscenes. I don't mind if developers have a story to tell, but try using the medium instead of resorting to the lazy option of cramming a ten-minute cinematic in the middle of play and let me skip it if I want, without losing vital info which will affect my next three hours of genuine gametime.
Shanyi

issue can fail to take into account the (relatively) imminent release of Nintendo's Revolution, I'm not sure. Biffo's lament that he'd like to see a console launched with the words 'You're going to experience types of gameplay which we guarantee you will never have seen before' could almost be taken from a recent Nintendo press release, and yet he makes no mention of the console or its potential.

In keeping with the trend of not giving the Revolution due consideration, Xbox chief J Allard's comments about the difficulties people will have playing EA Sports titles on Nintendo's machine are almost comically shallow. He seems to be fumbling to fault something truly original, and ends up sounding like a Luddite: "I don't know if I like the implementation because it ain't my remote. How am I going to watch a movie on Revolution? Am I going to have a different remote than that or am I going to have to use the four coloured buttons?" How about you just point and click at the screen?

Ad Wood

In terms of Mr Biffo's column, this was a matter of timing: issue 155 contained no Revolution controller commentary because it was written before Nintendo's unveiling. As for J Allard's thoughts, obviously we cannot speak on his behalf, but it's something we'll look to address next month as part of our extended prelaunch Xbox 360 coverage.

F

Topic: Pilotwings

Dragged the N64 out recently and couldn't resist having a quick go on *Pilotwings*. Its calmness is almost hypnotic, and there's something so peaceful about gliding around through hoops and into thermals. You could say it's the perfect 'Sunday game', if there is such a thing.
Monkeysteve

Yeah, love *Pilotwings*. *Animal Crossing* is a great game to get you so relaxed that your hands slide off the controller due to excessive dribble.
danbotding

My Sunday game has always been *John Madden*, right back to the Mega Drive original. I hate sports games as a rule, but I've always been a secret NFL fan, and this afternoon it's beer and Philly vs Kansas City. Keep playing until you get drunk enough to lose, then stop. Ideal.
Elmlea

I was reading page 22 of **E**155 last night and I noticed that the Quit section said: 'The influence of *GTA*; Have you seen *Crime Life*? What's going on, Konami?'

At first I thought you were knocking the game, which you and everyone else have the right to do. But then I thought maybe you were saying *Crime Life* was influenced by *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*. Can you please elaborate on what you meant?

I have attached a *Crime Life* FAQ so you can see the direction we were aiming for with the game.

Nana Penemo
Producer, Konami of Europe

Unfortunately we don't have the space to reproduce your FAQ, but we did have a good read of it. And we can only apologise if *Crime Life*'s theme of 'sandbox' gameplay and street thugs in gangs fighting each other for control of 'turf' to the accompaniment of a licensed hip-hop soundtrack led us to erroneously draw any comparisons with Rockstar's game.

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